

PROTEST AS SPECTACLE: CHALLENGING DOMINANT INSTITUTIONS TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

With worsening climate impacts, traditional forms of environmental protest are being replaced with more spectacular interventions seeking dramatic decarbonization. In this paper, we explore the case study of the Stop Adani campaign in Australia, which sought to prevent the construction of the Adani Carmichael coal mine; the first of several “mega-mines” in the previously untapped Galilee coal basin. We show how climate activists engaged in performing agonism to create a political frontier opposing the mine, building solidarity to create an equivalence of interest with other communities, and ritualizing active participation, through large mass gatherings to signal the political power of the cause. While such strategies may not be sufficient to stop the extraction and use of fossil fuels, worsening climate impacts suggest that climate protests are likely to grow and intensify. The question is how these spectacular protests can challenge dominant institutions maintaining the use of fossil fuels.

Keywords: Spectacle; protest; social movement; climate change; hegemony; Stop Adani

Beyond Microfoundations and Macrofoundations of Institutions: A Multi-Level Theory of Institutions
Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 104, 231–251

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ISSN: 0733-558X/doi:10.1108/S0733-558X20260000104010

INTRODUCTION

Following in the footsteps of earlier environmental protest, a new wave of climate activists is using spectacular and performance-based protest to stress the need for extra-institutional direct action (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017). This has been typified by groups such as Extinction Rebellion in the UK, which in April 2019 shut down central London for ten days via rolling protests and occupations, and Just Stop Oil which have disrupted major sporting events, cultural institutions, airports and highways capturing widespread media attention. This shift has been marked by a focus on activities that maximize media attention and enact protest as public “climate spectacles” (Johnson & Haarstad, 2022).

There is a growing literature in organization and management theory exploring the collective actions of social movements mobilizing for climate action (see e.g. Etchanchu et al., 2021). Within this scholarship, we are interested in developing a theory of “protest as spectacle” with the potential to subvert the institutionalized social order. We take a post-foundational position in moving “beyond the microfoundations and macrofoundations of institutions” (Steele & Haack, 2026) in explaining the possibilities for institutional change. What are seen as fixed institutions are in fact contingent and can, therefore, change. It is through language – any kind of symbolic or visual expression – that the material “facts” of institutional objects and practices become meaningful, reproduced and maintained (Phillips et al., 2004).

We use the theory of hegemony to refer to both (i) how institutions become “taken-for-granted” in maintaining the status-quo of existing power relations *and* (ii) the strategy of gaining active or passive consent in upholding dominant institutions (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony then involves both institutionalization in constructing the way things are, with alternatives becoming unthinkable (Zucker, 1983, p. 5), *and* the instituted institutions that are taken for granted (Gray et al., 2015). Institutions maintain their dominance through images, media, and representations that shape social relations (Debord, [1967] 2014), that is, “communication constitutes institutions” (Haack et al., 2019, p. 17). Through mass media, advertising, entertainment, and cultural production, existing social institutions – such as capitalism, governments, corporations, and even societal norms – are normalized to appear as the foundations of society and beyond critique.

Current climate activism can be seen as a counter-hegemonic movement that challenges the institutional order of fossil fuel dependence by constructing a “political frontier” against corporations or industries through, for example, demonstrations, lawsuits or boycotts (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007; Yaziji & Doh, 2013), aimed at shifting institutions toward more radical climate responses. The literature on the political contestation over climate change has revealed discursive strategies to challenge the institutional order of hierarchies and relations that organize society (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021; Hiatt et al., 2015; MacKay & Munro, 2012). These studies convincingly explain how discourses or frames are employed to mobilize for climate action. However, the linguistic emphasis in discourse or frame analyses (Cornelissen et al., 2015; Klein & Amis, 2020) pays less attention to (i) how these strategies are delivered and performed, and (ii) the political

context of the contestation. We argue that in the case of climate protest, the medium of communication is critically important in understanding the potential to challenge dominant institutions.

Our analysis draws on a case study of the Australian Stop Adani campaign which sought to prevent the construction of the Adani Carmichael coal mine in regional Queensland. Formed in early 2017, the Stop Adani Alliance involved hundreds of local sub-groups from across the country which undertook a variety of civil disobedience and protest activities and became one of the largest people-powered campaigns in Australian history (Gulliver et al., 2021). Through our analysis of this case we identify three processes underpinning the climate protests; (i) *performing agonism*, in which actions seek to maximize public and media attention to the cause and publicly shame their opponents in creating a political frontier; (ii) *building solidarity*, in which protest activities aim to disseminate the key messages of the campaign and create an equivalence of interests with other communities and groups, and (iii) *ritualizing active participation*, where large mass gatherings serve to bring people's concerns together and signal the political power of the cause. We name these three processes the "tightrope of activism" in overcoming the *problems of fossil fuel dominance*, the *atomization* of individuals in modern society, and the *inaction* often related to social media protests.

Our paper contributes to understanding the role of social movements in challenging dominant institutions (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017; Wright et al., 2021; Yaziji & Doh, 2013). In doing this, we aim to show the potential to invert the hegemony of dominant institutions with a performative spectacle that regenerates society – a counter-hegemonic spectacle. This also contributes to social movement theory (Etchanchu et al., 2021; Ferns et al., 2022) by showing how mobilization is held together by antagonism rather than homogeneity. Finally, our paper highlights the importance of attending to visual media in understanding how social movements challenge dominant institutions (Meyer et al., 2018). We do note, however, that creating such spectacles requires walking a tightrope between creating further distanced spectators and the mobilization of participation.

DOMINANT MEDIATIZED INSTITUTIONS

A common feature of corporate marketing and advertising has been the way in which images have replaced commodities as the engine of consumption. Social interactions and relationships are increasingly shaped by representations, advertisements, and mass media, rather than direct, lived experience. As French theorist Guy Debord ([1967] 2014) presciently warned in *The Society of the Spectacle*, we now live in a globalised capitalist economy in which image and artifice dominate experience and fundamentally shape the construction of meaning and identity. Human interaction is thus reduced to commodified exchange via images, and human existence has shifted from "*being into having*" and now, "*having into appearing*" (Debord, 2014: §17, original emphasis). This dreamscape of consumer culture has created alienated individuals isolated from each other, with active participation replaced by distanced representation.

While the expression of Debord's thesis is clearly evident in the late twentieth century development of corporate advertising, marketing and public relations (Klein, 1999), the growth of celebrity culture and the evolution of social media and technology suggests a further intensification of mediated domination, in which an individual's thoughts and desires can be further commodified within pervasive software algorithms (Flyverbom & Reinecke, 2017). This goes beyond passively viewing advertising and social media images that dominate modern life, to the internalization of how identities are curated through consumption and promoted within media channels.

Dominant institutions strategically use images and narratives to reinforce their position and create a world where appearances matter more than substance. The bodiless beings of institutions (Boltanski, 2011) are reified and become "real" through images and marketing. It is through this process that they gain their semantic security and dominance. For example, the institutions of corporations as legal "persons" with rights to "free speech" are normalized through marketing and media (Bakan, 2020). Western consumers engage with social media versions of institutions (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn), far away from the production of the consumer goods or the energy production of the digital services. Through the saturation of society with images of consumer goods, entertainment, and political marketing, social relations are mediated to the degree that they become "reality."

Indeed, as Debord ([1967] 2014) argued, radical or revolutionary ideas which challenge consumer capitalism are increasingly co-opted within dominant institutions through a process of recuperation. Contemporary examples of this are evident in the way corporate marketing has absorbed ideas and movements originally critical of the dominant ideology, stripped them of their radical intent and repurposed them as incentives for further consumption; whether it be the conversion of revolutionary icons like Che Guevara into fashion accessories, or the use of Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ or Me Too movements within the "woke-washing" of corporate advertising campaigns (Dauvergne & Lebaron, 2014; Rhodes, 2022). In this way, social movements which offer more radical and democratic alternatives are subsumed within corporate capitalism.

Dominant institutions are, simultaneously, held up as a representation of and to the world. As such, the mediation of domination is "the heart of this society's unreality" (Debord, [1967] 2014, §6). For example, corporate and political discourses around climate change stress an amorphous issue that is best responded to through incentives for corporate eco-efficiency, "climate-friendly" activities and market mechanisms to price and trade carbon emissions (Wright & Nyberg, 2015). This is evident in the confected performance of "sustainability reporting" and other corporate public relations that serve to greenwash the accelerated destruction of the planet. Climate disasters are sold back to consumers, themselves suffering from climate impacts, as entertainment, with the solution promoted as the fictional commodification of carbon to be captured, stored and traded (Nyberg et al., 2023). Responses and "solutions" are advertised in glossy sustainability reports which promote the ideas of carbon neutrality and "net zero," but which lack any fundamental changes to dominant institutions. Rather,

citizens are encouraged to engage with climate change as alienated consumers, voting with their dollars by buying “green” products and services.

In summary, the dominant institutions upholding corporate capitalism are reinforced and made “real” through consumable images or experiences. The mediatized social relations create shielded or “guarded” (Claus & Tracey, 2020) institutions that are reified and seen as “common sense” (Gramsci, 1971). This hegemony – both of institutions and institutionalizing – poses three key problems for those seeking to challenge it. First, there is the problem of *dominance*, in which powerful institutions respond to critique by turning it into another image of the mediatized dreamscape. Second, there is a problem of *atomization*, in which citizens are individualized through their role as consumers. Third, there is the problem of *inaction*, as consumption prioritizes passivity and spectatorship. Below, we will use the analytical toolkit provided by neo-Gramscian theories of new social movements (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) to unpack the political logic of dominant institutions in late capitalism and offer potential strategies of counter-hegemony.

COUNTER-HEGEMONIC SPECTACLE

Increasingly, media-savvy activists have learnt to harness spectacle to generate public attention to their cause. Examples include: environmentalists using viral images of environmental destruction as “mind bombs” to change public attitudes (Mathiesen, 2015); “culture jammers” who reinterpret corporate advertising to sarcastically reveal the realities of exploitation underlying the glossy spin (Harold, 2004); performances of environmental transgressions to protest corporate sponsorship of major cultural institutions (Motion, 2019); as well as artists and playwrights who subvert prevailing political and social assumptions through their art (Boal, 2015). Indeed, some of these contemporary acts of spectacularized protest refer back to the work of Debord and his followers in that through “détournement” (meaning deflection, diversion or re-routing) (Debord & Wolman, 2006), the spectacle of corporate marketing can potentially be turned back on itself.

In contrast to the more pejorative use of the term “performative protest” suggesting ineffective actions used “for show” (Paavolainen, 2022), we argue that by engaging in performative acts, these events and their digital replication can potentially disrupt dominant institutions’ narrative of business as usual. While spectacular protests may not necessarily offer solutions or developed political demands, the acts themselves disrupt the unity of the dominant institutions. They seek to establish a political frontier against fossil fuels, with protests becoming antagonistic rather than accommodating, since the solutions are not within the existing “common sense” or “political will” of the prevailing hegemony (Marchart, 2018). Rather, the spectacle of protest provides a glimpse of a world beyond the prevailing worldview and, simultaneously, the possibility for alternatives.

The potential in challenging dominant institutions is the construction of a negative identity responsible for the situation – fossil fuels and the political and economic systems which drive their extraction and use. This is a logic of

difference (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), in which the excluded “other,” based upon competing demands, is the subject of frustration expressed in protest (Marchart, 2018). In environmental movements, the solidarity of the protesters is not so much based on what they have in common but rather on their shared frustration over a political demand – to end fossil fuel extraction and investment. This is a critique that the fossil fuel industry cannot incorporate; such demands cannot be integrated within the prevailing hegemony. The “common sense” of dominant institutions is thus disrupted; the constructed reality of fossil fuel dependence is challenged. This political frontier, based upon difference, is necessary in constructing unity, or a logic of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), to allow for broader mobilization which includes supporters with somewhat different political demands or concerns. The performance of the protest spectacle thus establishes a radical frontier that entertains a broader audience for possible mobilization and overcoming atomization.

However, the effectiveness of the underlying performativity of environmental protest, or “protest spectacle” as we term it, is unclear. While the spectacular actions and stunts may attract mainstream media attention and increase public awareness of a particular environmental issue or cause, it can also serve as a target for political opponents (conservative media, corporations, and politicians – the dominant institutions) and further marginalize activists as fringe, impractical or dangerous. For instance, the recent upsurge of climate protest targeting infrastructure has been used as an excuse by governments for increasingly draconian laws which prohibit protest action and back it up with harsh financial and penal provisions (Irwin et al., 2022). By constructing protesters as “dangerous,” or even “terrorists,” fossil fuel industry associations and politicians (as spokespersons of dominant institutions) hinder protest mobilization by breaking the chain of equivalence. New norms and legislation safeguarding fossil fuel expansion are institutionalized.

Moreover, as Hudson (2023) has noted, while the spectacular and performative aspects of protest do lead to an initial impetus of enthusiasm and emotional bonding around a defined cause, this is difficult to maintain. In what he terms an “emotacycle,” the optimism and enthusiasm generated by the initial successes of large-scale protest and media attention, often recedes in the face of setbacks, media criticism and perceived inabilities to effect institutional change. Spectacular protest then is initially important in building and defining the protest movement, but not necessarily a sufficient element in achieving the movement’s goals to invert the hegemony. Challenging this problem of inaction requires protests which activate people as participatory and involved citizens.

Given this debate over the role and potential of spectacle in environmental protest and social movement organizing more generally, we focus on a case study of a significant, nation-wide climate protest movement, and explore the following research question: *what is the role of spectacle in environmental protest and how does it contribute to the achievement of a social movement’s objectives?* We do this through an analysis of the Australian Stop Adani protest campaign opposing the construction of the Adani Carmichael coal mine.

RESEARCH METHOD

Context

The Adani Carmichael coal mine was announced in November 2010 when the Queensland Government declared the project, rail links and coastal export terminals a state “significant project.” Adani Mining (a subsidiary of the Indian conglomerate Adani Corporation) proposed the project as one of the world’s largest thermal coal mines, estimated to produce up to 60 million tonnes of thermal coal for export by 2022 ([Queensland Government, 2010](#)). The mine was planned to be the first of several “mega-mines” in the previously untapped Galilee coal basin. As one of the world’s largest known coal reserves, opening the Galilee basin to coal mining represented a major new carbon frontier that would dramatically increase global carbon emissions. Despite this, the Adani mine enjoyed strong federal and state government support, with both framing it as a major economic development that would generate thousands of jobs.

The mine quickly became a focus of protest within a context of growing climate activism in Australia during the 2010s. Environmental groups such as 350.org, Market Forces, the Australian Conservation Foundation and Greenpeace focused on the Adani project as a key example of climate-wrecking fossil fuel expansion. This critique increased as the mine and its associated port and rail-line were granted approvals by the state and federal governments. Adani’s Abbot Point coal terminal, situated on the coast near Bowen, created a clear connection to one of the world’s most recognized and endangered icons, the Great Barrier Reef. Catastrophic coral bleaching on the Reef during the summers of 2016 and 2017 generated significant global media attention linking coal mining, climate change and the future of vulnerable ecosystems in the public mind ([Wright & Nyberg, 2022](#)).

In March 2017, the Stop Adani Alliance launched at Parliament House in Canberra with representatives from 13 environmental organizations setting out their agenda to prevent the mine and ban further coal mine expansion. Over the following three years the Stop Adani alliance became a grassroots organization, consisting of over 120 local autonomous sub-groups. The alliance undertook a range of protest activities building civic opposition to the mine and aiming to thwart its construction. In the face of federal and state government support for the project, including mine approvals, the extinguishment of Indigenous native title, the granting of water rights, and a proposal for a billion dollar government loan, the Stop Adani campaign became a dominant issue in Australian politics and a leading example of a distributed, grass-roots network of climate activism, undertaking over 1,300 civil resistance actions and promoting 3,000 different protest events ([Gulliver et al., 2021](#)).

Data Collection

In developing the case study of this protest movement, we accessed a range of qualitative data documenting the protest action undertaken by Stop Adani campaign. Social media provided a major source of data, specifically the Facebook

pages of the Stop Adani Alliance and related organizations 350.org, Market Forces, Australian Marine Conservation Society, and School Strike 4 Climate. These Facebook pages (along with other social media channels such as Flickr, YouTube, and Instagram) served as key mediums through which the campaign and specific actions were communicated amongst activists, as well as narrating a story of social movement organizing.

While the use of social media has the advantage of easy access to large amounts of qualitative data spontaneously created by many authors and unconstrained by researcher influence, it also poses challenges given the sheer volume and scale of data and its dynamic and ephemeral nature (Andreotta et al., 2019). In searching these sites, we focused on the collection of visual imagery that was used in the campaign (such as posters, advertisements, documentary films, and social media posts), as well as still and video images that directly documented protest actions, rallies, gatherings, concerts, and roadshows as part of the campaign. These social media sites included many thousands of photographic and video images and a purposive sampling approach was used to identify indicative images from the hundreds of different protests and civil resistance actions undertaken. We used the collected images and accompanying texts as a window into the spectacle of the protest and how events were then presented by the activists. The resulting 721 visual images, videos, and accompanying posts were then collated and categorized by date of posting and keyword tagged in the image cataloguing software, Adobe Lightroom (see Table 1).

To provide additional context to the social media data we also conducted a search of relevant news and media coverage of key developments in the Adani dispute from the project’s announcement in 2010, to the online movement of protest action following the outbreak of the COVID global pandemic in March 2020. While the campaign against the Adani mine continues to this day, the defined move from physical to online protest provided a natural break in proceedings and assisted in limiting the amount of data for analysis. This media data was also supplemented by additional images and observational notes collected by the lead author who attended various Stop Adani public events and climate rallies during 2017–2019.

Table 1. Visual Data Sources.

Source	pre-2017	2017	2018	2019- March 2020	Total
Stop Adani Facebook page		126	78	56	260
350.org Facebook page	33	4			37
Greenpeace Facebook page	4	6			10
Stop Adani Cairns FB page		56	47		103
Climate Change Action Network FB Page				31	31
Stop Adani Flickr page		56	63	25	144
Media images	4	12	6	13	35
Research photos		13	35	53	101
All images					721

Finally, we also conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with key informants from within the Stop Adani campaign including the heads of several of the participating NGOs, organizers and activist leaders in local Stop Adani branches (see Table 2). In the interviews, we asked about their objectives and experiences in organizing protest actions, problems they encountered and how effective they believed they had been. These interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes were anonymized and fully transcribed.

Data Analysis

A first stage in our analysis of the combined data was to construct a timeline of the dispute, identifying key events in the mine’s approval and development, as well as different protests actions. In the second stage of analysis, we coded the collected data (images, media articles, observational notes and interview transcripts) using the qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo. We identified and coded actors (e.g., Adani, contractors, government, politicians, NGOs, protest leaders) and events (information-sharing activities, organization and planning events, social/fundraising gatherings, protest actions) according to different stages in the campaign. From this coding we noted the way in which the Stop Adani Alliance was distinctive in its emphasis upon expressive acts of protest in highly visible public spaces.

Focusing on the importance of expressive acts of protest, we then coded for different activities (e.g., rallies, marches, door-knocking, blockades, “die-ins,” human signs, climate strikes), and the political demand and implications of the protests. In this third stage of analysis, we attended to what these acts of protest accomplished in the spatialized field of actors, including environmental movements, firms, and states. That is, the discursive accomplishment of protest acts in relation to the dominant institution (Meyer et al., 2018). The analysis thematically distinguished three horizontal processes underlying the protests of the environmental movement: (i) *performing agonism*; (ii) *building solidarity*; and (ii) *ritualizing active participation*.

Table 2. Semi-structured Interviews.

Interview #	Respondent Description
1	CEO, environmental NGO (Sydney)
2	Stop Adani organizer (Brisbane)
3	Local politician & Stop Adani supporter (North Queensland)
4	Stop Adani activist (Cairns)
5	Filmmaker & Stop Adani organizer (Sydney)
6	Stop Adani activist (Cairns)
7	Organizer, environmental NGO (Cairns)
8	Stop Adani activist (Cairns)
9	Organizer, Stop Adani (Cairns)
10	Organizer, Stop Adani (Mackay)
11	Organizer, environmental NGO (Cairns)
12	Director, environmental NGO (Sydney)
13	Stop Adani activist (Cairns)
14	Music festival organizer (Brisbane)
15	Organizer, GBR conservation group (Cairns)

In the sections that follow we outline how each of these three aspects of protest as spectacle was manifested in the Stop Adani campaign.

PERFORMING AGONISM

A key theme underlying “protest as spectacle” is to challenge hegemony through public actions that present a form of critique which is difficult to incorporate or dismiss. In the case of Stop Adani, this involved the promotion of protest actions that creatively constructed a political frontier against banks, businesses and politicians which were supporting the project. This was carried out through highly visible and engaging protests that generated media coverage and public attention. As one of the Stop Adani organizers noted:

We’re now in a country without any independent media, somewhat uniquely in the world. So, spectacle is one of the only tactics you’ve got to get around it. You take your own images and then you use social media to tell that story. (I4)

This strategy of protest actions as media spectacle had been established by groups such as 350.org and Market Forces which had targeted major banks over their financing of new coal mines. Flash-mobs of protestors would mass around the entrance of suburban bank branches and corporate headquarters clad in colored T-shirts matching the banks’ branding and then ceremonially cut up credit cards in front of assembled media cameras. With the formation of the Stop Adani Alliance, these protests intensified across the country, with campaigners at bank branches and corporate headquarters seeking public commitments from executives that they would not fund the construction of Adani’s mine. In one example, over a hundred protestors picketed the Westpac Bank’s lavish 200th anniversary birthday party in Sydney, with protestors waving “Stop Adani” placards, wearing bright orange “Nemo” clownfish outfits and several chaining themselves to scaffolding above the party. As one of the leaders of the Stop Adani campaign outlined:

We were having meetings all the time with the Big Four banks about Adani. They didn’t like the look of people standing out in front of their banks, cutting up the cards, or sitting-in in their branches ... having young people, with whatever university they were at, go to their local branch and say, “we want meetings about Adani and your support for it, your funding of it, what role you play.” (I1)

This growing public escalation of protest spectacle proved effective with each of the four major banks (as well as many overseas investors) eventually making public statements during 2017 that they would not fund the Adani mine project (Hannam, 2017b). The name “Adani” became the signifier that held together the mobilization, providing a coherent representation for political protest. The protests moved the banks over to the protestors side of the “political frontier” – the political demands of the environmental movement became equivalent to the interests of the banks and differentiated from the Adani mine.

Following this success, Stop Adani protestors extended their campaign to include other businesses planning to work with Adani. Freight-rail companies,

engineering firms and even coach operators all became targets of Stop Adani protests outside their corporate offices. Thus, a range of industries and companies became associated with the negative identity of “Adani” created by the activists. In later stages of the campaign, these protests went global with German Fridays for Future protestors staging protests and a “die-in” outside the Munich headquarters of engineering conglomerate Siemens, following its decision to continue working with Adani at the same time as “Black Summer” bushfires raged across the Australian east coast (Sachgau, 2020).

Political leaders were also key targets of protest, with activists linking them to the negative identity of Adani. Examples included a beach party of hundreds of Stop Adani protestors outside then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s Sydney harbourside mansion, and activists dressed in hard-hats and hi-vis vests photo-bombing the Federal Treasurer at industry gatherings. As had been the case with the bank protests, this targeting of politicians featured a quirky and theatrical approach, including protestors dressed as white “climate angels,” colorful coral or clownfish, and placards with appeals to “Save the Reef,” “Climate Emergency,” and “Coral not Coal.” In one particularly striking protest action, Cairns Stop Adani activists protested outside the federal member’s electoral office dressed as “climate zombies” resulting in several arrests and generating significant media interest (Cluff, 2018).

Building the identity of the protest movement was also underpinned by the strong use of symbols and attire. The movement’s distinctive black t-shirts emblazoned with the red “Stop Adani” traffic sign logo was widely distributed, as were bumper stickers and “Stop Adani” earrings which attracted media attention when the former United Nations climate chief, Christiana Figueres wore them during a visit to Australia (Hannam, 2017a). The symbolic use of a discursive signifier held together the differing elements of the campaign and provided a simple political demand: “Stop Adani.”

As the first process of protest as spectacle, *performing agonism* created a political frontier by drawing attention to the cause and publicly shaming the movement’s opponents. Through maximizing media and public attention, key stakeholders were “forced” to choose a side of the political frontier. The styling of the protest activity as eye-catching, satirical and carnivalesque undermined the carefully curated corporate branding of their targets (the Adani corporation, associated businesses, political parties, and leaders). The engaging style of the protests made it difficult for government and industry to demonize, dismiss, or incorporate in response. This focus continued in subsequent years as the campaign built in size and scale, but also involved other elements of spectacle that sought to challenge the fossil fuel hegemony.

BUILDING SOLIDARITY

With the creation of a signifier to hold the movement together – “Stop Adani” – the mobilization was able to construct an equivalence across a range of different groups and communities. Beyond targeted protest actions, spectacle was also a

key element in the mobilization and movement-building of the Stop Adani campaign which relied upon the creation of a distributed network of aligned branches across major cities and regions of the east coast of the country. One of the first activities of the protest movement was the creation of a Stop Adani Roadshow featuring musicians, performers, environmental campaigners, Indigenous leaders, and renewable energy advocates who outlined the threat the Adani mine posed in worsening climate change. Over four days touring the major cities of Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne in April 2017, over 4,000 people attended the Roadshow which then formed the basis for the formation of local Stop Adani sub-groups. As one of the organizers outlined:

We needed to make Stop Adani a household name and Adani a household name. The Roadshow and the launch of the Stop Adani network was a deliberate strategy to say, “we need to make it the biggest campaign in Australia,” and a big part of that was just visibility. (I2)

The Roadshow coincided with the release of the 30-minute movie *Guarding the Galilee* which documented the diverse communities that would be impacted by the mine, including farmers who spoke of the threats to their land and water, coastal groups and marine tourism operators confronting coral bleaching, Indigenous peoples whose land rights had been expunged, and finance experts questioning government subsidies to a multinational mining company (Schofield, 2017). Distributed across the Stop Adani network, the film provided a conversation starter for community meetings across the country and building greater solidarity within the movement. As the film’s director noted:

[...] that was really, really satisfying, actually hearing audiences respond in such a positive way. And of course, after the screening, then there was all this activity, “Sign up here. Give us your email. We’ll keep in touch! Would you like to volunteer?” That’s how movements are built. (I5)

Adding impact to this was the release of the Netflix documentary *Chasing Coral* (Orlowski, 2017), which documented the mass bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef to a global audience of millions. The medium of film as a spectacle of critique was a recurring theme in the Stop Adani campaign, with other short documentary films produced as part of the campaign over subsequent years to further drive movement-building.

Constructing the Stop Adani chain of equivalence also relied upon the creation of the branding of the campaign and encouraging the formation of local activities which perpetuated its public profile. As one of the founders of the campaign outlined:

[...] ultimately, it was up to local groups how they took action on the campaign, and we would provide guidance ... so there was a lot of materials we put out there with everything open source, “you can download and use the Stop Adani logo, and merch. You don’t have to ask our permission to do that, you can make your own posters.” We had tactics, like “paint the town” where it was literally “go out and plaster posters everywhere or drop a big Stop Adani banner somewhere.” (I2)

Different groups could pick and choose which of the material and tactics to use in their campaigning using Facebook, social media and film nights for coordination and to build connections. As the same organizer noted:

So we did deliberate things around getting the message out there. But I think the creativity and the flare that was driven by those groups ... and I guess we tried to play a role of making sure they're sharing that and inspiring other groups. (I2)

Building the spectacle of protest and maximizing its public visibility also involved a range of celebrity voices, including popular musicians, film stars, best-selling writers, and famous environmentalists and television personalities. Examples included rock band Midnight Oil which performed sell-out concerts promoting the Stop Adani message; pop-star Montaigne appeared on the red carpet at a music awards with the words "Stop Adani" emblazoned across her face; award-winning authors Tim Winton and Richard Flanagan who penned articles and spoke at Stop Adani rallies; as well as famous television personalities such as Sir David Attenborough whose documentary on the Great Barrier Reef explicitly focused on the threat of climate change and coal mining (Wright & Nyberg, 2022). These famous faces and their endorsements proved critical in broadening the reach of the protest campaign and engaging different communities to the cause. As the leader of one of the protest organizations argued: "... it was vital to have celebrities join the Stop Adani campaign as many have huge followings allowing us to reach many millions of people we wouldn't reach otherwise, particularly those outside of Australia" (I1).

Thus, the second identified process in protest as spectacle involved the *building of solidarity* in a mass protest movement, which spanned different communities. Activists created a wide alliance in the struggle against the prevailing power bloc of business and government. This was evident through the highly distributed, grass-roots campaign which involved over 120 geographically dispersed sub-groups and over a thousand different protest actions over the period of investigation (Gulliver et al., 2021). The different groups and audiences all had somewhat different political demands, but the protest spectacle created an equivalence by using "Stop Adani" as the negative signifier that held the movement together.

RITUALIZING ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

The third process we identified was the ritual of protest evident in recurring mass rallies and large public gatherings. These events not only highlighted the growing political presence of the Stop Adani movement through the large numbers of people involved but also acted as a space for citizen activism in an engaging and accessible manner. The festive mood of these gatherings was evident in the use of games, chants, colorful costumes, mannequins, and play-acting. As one regional Stop Adani organizer noted: "It's very exhausting and pretty demoralizing confronting climate collapse... So it's important to me to bring fun into activist spaces to make it more attractive for people, more energizing for people, more empowering for people" (I8).

An early example of such participatory protest occurred in October 2017 when a coordinated "Stop Adani Big Day of Action" was organized with rallies in sixty different locations across the country involving over 20,000 people. Many of these events featured mass "human signs" with hundreds of protestors on

beaches and in parks combining to spell out the words “Stop Adani” filmed from the air via drones. The festive nature of these gatherings was captured in images of protestors in costumes and masks of the Prime Minister and the head of the Adani Corporation dancing on the beach with large sacks of faux money labeled “Your Taxes \$1 billion.” These striking images not only highlighted the spectacular nature of the protest but also the active participation of a large numbers of citizens in challenging the dominant political discourse. As one of the Stop Adani organizers explained:

You keep people engaged with stories and other events that they can go to, other things they can participate in. You know, “we’re having a rally at the Westpac [bank] headquarters in Sydney. Let’s do this. Let’s get down there!” (15)

The role of mass gatherings in the Stop Adani campaign as a form of active participation was repeated in subsequent years with broader climate rallies in major cities and regional centers. In the tropical Queensland city of Cairns, a centre for reef tourism, the local Stop Adani group engaged in rallies and protests which had strongly performative themes. These included mass “die-ins” with protestors floating on their backs in the public swimming pool in office clothes with signs reading “profits = death,” as well as rallies of several hundred in the local park featuring “climate angels” dressed in white holding banners featuring the Stop Adani logo and the words “Save the Reef – No New Coal.”

In the build up to the May 2019 federal election, as climate change and the Adani mine rose to become dominant election issues, these mass gatherings increased in number as a form of social movement mobilization. A School Climate Strike in March that year resulted in over 150,000 students striking across the country demanding the government and opposition parties take action to tackle worsening climate change, with the school strikers waving Stop Adani placards and leading Stop Adani chants (Nguyen, 2018).

This third process of protest spectacle was important for ritualizing active participation, which served to show the political strength of the cause. Through mass rallies and large protests which employed a festival-like atmosphere, those participating in the chain of equivalence built a collective identity of engaging in a noble cause and reinforced their motivation for future political action. As a social movement, these collective spectacles concentrated emotions of hope, courage and joy which were critical to the building of movement solidarity, collective bonding, and the on-going sustainability of the campaign.

While ultimately unable to prevent the Adani mine from being constructed, the Stop Adani campaign did succeed in delaying and dramatically reducing the size of the mine with its current operations about 20% of its original intended capacity. The protests also succeeded in forcing major banks and investors – as well as a broad swathe of corporate partners – to abandon support for the project, and largely destroyed the social license of Adani, forcing the company to hastily rename its operations Bravus Australia (Philpott, 2020). Perhaps most importantly, the high public profile of the Stop Adani campaign forestalled the broader development of coal mining in the Galilee Basin, thwarting one of the world’s largest new carbon frontiers (Readfearn, 2022). Underpinning these successes

was the way those opposing the mine had created a nation-wide grassroots protest movement that cut through the media and political silence on coal mine expansion and etched the Adani name within Australian public consciousness. Here the role of protest as spectacle was key.

DISCUSSION: THE TIGHTROPE OF ACTIVISM

The Stop Adani campaign is an illustrative example of the growing role of spectacle in environmental protest. Recognizing the importance of images and performance in media-dominated societies, environmental and social activists are increasingly using spectacle to challenge and subvert dominant political discourses. This goes beyond just the words and text of protest messages and is embedded within the way these messages are communicated and conveyed as performance. As illustrated by the Stop Adani case, these “protest spectacles” include a variety of expressive actions: targeted protests and blockades of corporate offices and functions; the gate-crashing and photo-bombing of business and political meetings and media events; the engagement of celebrity voices on social media and in public performance; the use of documentary films and road shows; mass rallies and protest convoys; and the conscious branding and creation of material symbols that define the protest movement.

In the beginning of this paper, we argued that mediatized dominant institutions posed three problems for counter-hegemonic protest: *domination*, *atomization*, and *inaction*. Following our empirical analysis, we propose a theoretical framework outlining the tensions confronting activists in challenging each of these problems (see Table 3).

First, in terms of the problem of *dominance*, a protest spectacle walks the tightrope of agonism between incorporation and hyper-polarization. On one side of this tightrope are the incorporated “Big Green” environmental organizations (Klein, 2014), where protest has become absorbed by dominant corporate institutions. On the other side are attacks on fossil fuel property and infrastructure of more radical activists (Malm, 2021). The latter antagonism can lead to hyper-polarization in which protestors are framed as “extreme” or “dangerous,” which then feeds into the production of the dominant institutions and results in further institutionalization in the form of taken for granted norms and repressive legislation. To avoid incorporation, the protest builds an agonistic response to a narrow set of actors – in this case, the fossil fuel industry and its supporters. In creating a clear political frontier there can be no possible compromise or negotiation. The tightrope of activism is

Table 3. The Spectacle of Protest as Counter-Hegemonic Strategy.

			Tightrope of Activism		
The problem of dominance	incorporation	⇔	agonism	⇐	hyper-polarization
The problem of atomization	no signifier	⇔	solidarity	⇐	empty signifier
The problem of inaction	spectatorship	⇔	active participation	⇐	mass protest

about maintaining a political frontier, where protestors frame their opponents as adversaries rather than enemies that must be eradicated (Mouffe, 2005). This is a difficult balance; how protest actions are interpreted and perceived is often at the mercy of institutions like corporations, governments, and media which already have control over the main sources of public communication.

Second, in relation to the problem of *atomization*, the protest spectacle requires solidarity across diverse groups and actors. Thus, the critique within the protest spectacle needs to be sufficiently broad to mobilize different communities and build an equivalence between different political demands – in this case, the signifier “Stop Adani,” a simple message around which the diverse groups and actors can build equivalence. However, it cannot be so broad that it lacks focus and becomes an empty signifier that can be absorbed within the spectacle (e.g., the discourse of “sustainability”). With this we mean that the signifier becomes irrepresentable and can mean almost anything (Laclau, 2005); it can be used to construct an equivalence by almost any group. For example, even fossil fuel companies are using “climate change” to develop an equivalence with concerned consumers in society (Wright & Nyberg, 2024). The tightrope of protest spectacle thus tries to walk the line between, on the one hand, holding together the different requests or interests and, on the other, a broad mobilization that becomes meaningless or easily employed by their adversaries.

Third, for the problem of *inaction*, a protest spectacle needs to generate participation. The tension here is between the inaction of spectatorship, where the protest becomes entertainment without arousing mobilization, and on the other hand, mass protests that leave no room for the formation of individual participation. In the former, the protest spectacle becomes reproduced by the mass media for consumption. This creates a distance in the form of “spectacular separation” (Debord, [1967] 2014, §167), both between the spectator and the protesters as well as between the spectator and people’s grievances or suffering. In the latter, there is a risk that protest becomes just that – a spectacle. Indeed, this is the kind of critique implied in the negative use of the term “performative protest” (Paavolainen, 2022). While mass protest gets attention, without linking the event to political demands there is no challenge to dominant institutions. Active protest participation is built on a frustration that is articulated and shared among the protesters. In walking this tightrope, the participants may not have “something” in common beyond the shared frustration toward those responsible (Marchart, 2018). The participants identify with the grievance, and it is ritualized in their active performance.

In walking this tightrope, there is the possibility to build the movement; to invite participation; to illustrate the value of what might be lost and to urge those who might otherwise support the project to choose a different path. Through spectacular protests, the dominant mediatized institutions are inverted and the spokespersons for the institutions are challenged. The protests show the potential for doing things differently; for coming together rather than separating, and for taking action rather than relying on representation.

Contributions

Our study contributes to the discussion of how social movements challenge dominant institutions (Rojas & King, 2019; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017; Wright et al., 2021; Yaziji & Doh, 2013), by explaining the possibility for spectacular protests to overcome the inaction of spectatorship. The image-rich and emotional framing of much corporate advertising and public relations is deliberately designed to maximize people's engagement as consumers and reject feelings of doubt, concern, or guilt in their consumption (Wright & Nyberg, 2015). As Debord ([1967] 2014) notes, such is the power of the mediatized representation that we now internalize this relation through the consumption choices we make, and how this consumption informs our self-identity. To subvert or challenge such dominant narratives requires engaging with the dominant institutions on their own terms, using existing media channels to promote alternative messages which lead citizens to question the institutionalized order. Protestors utilize the medium of the spectacle to communicate alternative framings of the world and challenge what is seen as "common sense" – business as usual is not neutral nor evident. Thus, rather than a purely ritualistic endeavor, the use of spectacle in protest can generate a significant and on-going movement of social activism.

More specifically, we contribute to social movement theory by outlining three processes – performing agonism, building solidarity, and ritualizing active participation – that protest spectacles can potentially employ to avoid incorporation. Any broad social movement involves constituencies with differing and conflicting demands (Yaziji & Doh, 2013). However, to be successful, radical organizations need to develop an agonistic relation that can be used as a nodal point to connect multiple conflicting demands. This challenges the broader social movement literature, which suggests that radical groups require constituents that are ideologically homogeneous and that these organizations tend to become more reformative (or incorporated) over time (de Bakker et al., 2013; Yaziji & Doh, 2013). Protest spectacles are not radical in their commonality, rather, they are radical in the uncompromising identification of an actor or group responsible for frustrating their demands. It is important to note that it is the institutionalized order that forges what is seen as "common sense" and provides boundaries of what is "sensible" in acting on, for example, climate change (Levy & Egan, 2003; Nyberg et al., 2018). Thus, what is seen as "radical" can potentially shift by using protest mobilization to construct a broad chain of equivalence that, then, becomes the "sensible" center.

Second, we contribute to the literature on political contestation, especially over climate action (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021; MacKay & Munro, 2012) by developing a theory of the spectacle of protest – a tightrope of activism. The literature thus far has emphasized how hegemony in climate politics is established (Levy & Egan, 2003) and maintained (Ferns & Amaeshi, 2021). However, there is limited theoretical development for the possibility of counter-hegemony. For example, MacKay and Munro (2012) outline the counter-hegemonic tactics employed by Greenpeace against ExxonMobil – lobbying governments, direct action by activists, disruptive image events, and army of online cyber-activists – without developing a theory of the protests. While the tactics identified by MacKay and Munro

overlap with some of the protest processes in our case, we develop these ideas by showing the theoretical logic underlying these processes and the tightrope of activism needed to avoid becoming neutralized by incorporation.

Third, this focus on counter-hegemony also offers the possibility to develop a more “horizontal” analysis of institutionalization. Instead of a “bottom-up” (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2017) or “micro–macro” (Steele & Haack, 2026) analysis of institutional change, we argue that local challenges to institutional rules and norms occur on the same level. In the contestation over social and environmental issues, both the local protests and the (bodiless) institutions they oppose require spokespersons for their constitution. Forms of institutionalization are thus spatialized through the creation of a broader coalition of different actors held together by particular interests or political demands. Institutional spokespersons for dominant institutions after all only speak for a more powerful coalition of actors. What is seen as “macro” can then be replaced by discussion of dominance, or hegemony, in how these institutions are reinforced and upheld by ensuring that any alternative is naïve, or even dangerous. In the case of fossil fuel expansion, this is articulated by making an equivalence between fossil fuels and societal goods or political demands, such as economic prosperity and energy security (Nyberg et al., 2018), as well as a differentiation toward environmental protesters as extremists or even “terrorists” (Irwin et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Around the world, new forms of climate activism are emerging that challenge the prevailing political and corporate narrative. As highlighted by the actions of groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, Ende Gelände, and Just Stop Oil, recent climate protests appeal directly to public sentiment by focusing on the central role of the fossil fuel industry as the key driver of a worsening climate crisis. Recognizing that only a change in public sentiment and political demands can shift the prevailing political narrative, these groups seek to capture public attention and cut-through the media silence with spectacular mass actions of protest.

As the Stop Adani example demonstrates, while protest as spectacle may be insufficient to prevent the continued extraction and use of fossil fuels, it can certainly act to delay and diminish them while corroding their social legitimacy. Successfully negotiating this tightrope of activism thus offers one strategy in building a broad social movement for climate action, alongside other initiatives such as fossil fuel divestment (Hestres & Hopke, 2020), legal prosecutions of governments and corporations for “ecocide” (Higgins et al., 2013), and the promotion of alternative renewable energy development. While governments at the behest of corporate sponsors seek the prohibition of civil protest (Irwin et al., 2022), the spectacle of climate protest is only likely to intensify over coming decades. As the climate crisis worsens, organizational and institutional scholars can play an important role in identifying how the dominant institution of fossil fuel hegemony can be challenged and replaced by more sustainable models of social organization. Given what is at stake, this is a challenge our academic community urgently needs to embrace.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Research for this paper was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP180102064).

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