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Who is that (wo)man in the street? From the normalisation of protest to the normalisation of the protester

PETER VAN AELST & STEFAAN WALGRAVE
University of Antwerp, Wilrijk, Antwerp, Belgium

Abstract. The time has long since passed that protests and demonstrations were regarded as the possible beginning of violent revolutionary ferment. Venting dissatisfaction or making demands in the streets has become commonplace in our 'demonstration-democracy'. In this article we examine whether this normalisation of street protest also means that more heterogeneous groups of people take to the streets. Have citizens become potentially peaceful protesters or is protest politics still the domain of union militants, progressive intellectuals, and committed students? In answering these questions we will use the three research methods most commonly used for studying collective action: population surveys, protest event-analysis and interviews with protesters at demonstrations.

Introduction

At the turn of the century, the French psychologist Gustave Le Bon (1895), a founding father of collective action studies, regarded all street protest as a form of deviant behaviour. He believed the lower classes lost themselves in the mind of the crowd and let their primitive instincts take over. Le Bon's ideas were reflected in classic breakdown theories which regarded participation in collective action as an 'unconventional, irrational type of behaviour' (Klandermans 1984). These theories hold that (relative) deprivation, shared grievances and generalised beliefs, are determinants of participation. With the arrival of resource mobilisation theory, these ideas have been replaced by explanatory models which emphasise the position in social networks and the costs and benefits of participation in a social movement or collective action (McCarthy & Zald 1977). Resource mobilisation theory was explored further in the 1980s and 1990s. Klandermans (1984) and Turner & Killian (1993) among others criticised ardent followers of resource mobilisation theory, because they felt they had gone too far in rejecting social-psychological analyses and suggested it should be adapted. At the same time, another explanatory theory, based on the political opportunity structure, started to gain ground and popularity. This approach emphasises the political element in all

collective action (Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi et al. 1995; Tarrow 1996). Recently a consensus has started to develop among most sociologists and political scientists about the compatibility of these different approaches. Only their mutual integration in, for example, the revised political process model of McAdam et al. (1996), can give a satisfactory explanation for the rise, success and decline of social movements and their collective action.

Changes in theoretical approaches to collective action and social movements cannot be detached from the new style of protest which developed in Western democracies in the late 1960s. Theories followed the reality of the streets. Moreover, in addition to introducing new issues to the street, new social movements also produced a new kind of protester. The demographic profile of environmental activists differs radically from that of disgruntled workers: they are both younger and more educated. Protest is no longer a disorganised outburst of the dissatisfied lower classes but the domain of the politically active, well-educated middle class. As a result, it is less easy to dismiss protest as irrational behaviour (Hooghe 1997). Researchers now stress the rational, political and participatory nature of collective action. No longer threatening or undermining democracies, it is beneficial, makes better politics, and is actually essential in a mature political system (Rucht 1998).

Social research has shown that the arrival of the new post-materialistic concerns did not replace the old socio-economic issues, rather they developed alongside them and thus resulted in a general increase in issues generating protest. This appears to be confirmed by longitudinal research on protest marches in Belgium (Van Aelst & Walgrave 1999).[1] The bread-and-butter issues of the past, such as employment, have remained and have been supplemented by new concerns such as peace, anti-racism and the environment. Since citizens are now aware of an expanded repertoire of both new and old issues, the number of protesters in Belgium has risen relentlessly in the post-war era. In the most recent period, from 1990 to 1997, newspaper and police archives[2] mentioned more than 3 million protesters in Belgium out of a population of only 10 million (Van Aelst & Walgrave 1999). Duyvendak & Koopmans (1992) indicate that in many Western democracies pseudo-scientific intuition still uses the turbulent 1960s as the mythical reference point for collective action. Yet 'as protest becomes less unconventional, it also becomes less noticeable and newsworthy' (Dalton 1996: 71). This explains why, contrary to expectations, more people have recently taken to the streets than in the period immediately after May 1968 (Figure 1). Although there were more protests in the late 1960s, they were more limited in scope and participation levels were much lower. The number of people taking part in protest demonstrations has risen steadily in Belgium since the 1950s.

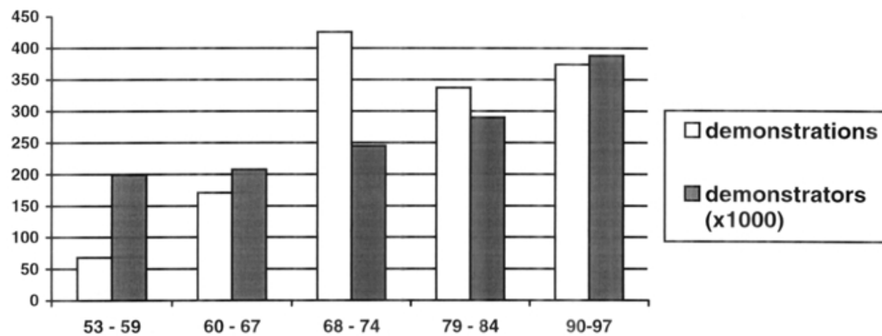

Figure 1. Average number of demonstrations and demonstrators (×1000) per year in Belgium: 1953–1974 (Smits 1984), 1979–1984 (Ulens 1994), 1990–1997 (Van Aelst & Walgrave 1999).

On the basis of a newspaper analysis, Rucht (1998) shows that whilst the evolution of collective protest in West Germany between 1950 and 1992 is similar, it is less linear. The number of protesters per year rose strongly from the 1950s to the early 1990s. The average percentage however fluctuated in between, with lows in the 1960s and especially in the 1970s, and peaks in the 1980s. With the exception of the German case, longitudinal protest-event data are rare and difficult to compare cross-nationally. Instead we obtained a cross-national picture of demonstration levels by using available survey data. These data confirm that Belgium and Germany are no exceptions and that the number of people taking part in protests continues to increase (Table 1).

Table 1. Attending lawful demonstrations in Western countries 1974–1990 (in %)

	1974	1981	1990
France	–	27	33
Netherlands	7	13	25
Belgium	–	14	23
(West) Germany	9	15	21
USA	11	12	15
Great Britain	6	10	14

Sources: Political action (1974), world value study (1981, 1990) in Topf (1995) and Dalton (1996).

Therefore it would seem that the protest generation of the 1960s has found successors in all Western democracies thus ensuring that both the number of

protests and the number of citizens participating in peaceful collective acts has continued to grow (Kriesi & Castenmiller 1987).

The increasing number of demonstrators – up to an average of one in four citizens in Western Europe – does not say anything about the legitimacy accorded to protest by citizens and the state. In the late 1970s Marsh & Kaase (1979: 135) established empirically that the increased level of street protest in the Western world tended to go together with a 'surprisingly permissive climate of opinion'. They concluded 'that what was extremism in the 1960s is becoming the legitimacy of the 1970s'. Lawful demonstrations are becoming increasingly accepted and lie on the boundary between orthodox and unorthodox political behaviour (March 1977). According to Fuchs (1990) and Topf (1995), both the number and legitimacy of all kinds of peaceful protest acts have risen to such an extent in Western Europe that any reference to 'unconventional' forms of participation is actually outmoded. A number of examples will clarify this. In France the number of respondents who approved (strongly) of lawful demonstration as a form of protest rose from 50 percent in 1988 to 62 percent in 1995 (Favre et al. 1997); in Belgium, this number was already 75 percent in 1995, and was surpassed only by petition signing (80 percent) (Beerten et al. 1997). These results contrast sharply with figures on more obstructive and violent acts. Only 1 percent of Belgian and French citizens approved of causing damage to property. According to della Porta (1999: 91) 'the normalisation of some forms of protest goes along with the stigmatisation of others, [i.e., more violent forms]'. Normalisation refers primarily to 'legal unconventional action (petitions, demonstrations), less to illegal acts of civil disobedience (wildcat strike, occupying buildings, ...), and not at all to political violence (against others, damaging property)' (Fuchs 1990: 5). The taboo on violence has not disappeared.[3]

The attitude of the police towards protest action seems to suggest that both public opinion and the state now regard peaceful street protests as legitimate ways to demonstrate or vent feelings of frustration. Research on the policing of protest in different Western countries has shown that the police favour negotiating and cooperating with demonstrators over acting in a repressive manner (Della Porta 1995; McPhail et al. 1998). Fears that an increase in street protest would undermine democracy have proved groundless. According to the political opportunity structure approach, which regards the opportunities provided by the political system as crucial factors in the rise of collective action, the political process has been opened up in most Western European countries and has learned how to handle protest. By accepting to some degree that street protest is a basic democratic right, political elites have also normalised it (Dalton 1996).

We can conclude that the growing number of peaceful protests and the increased legitimacy accorded to such actions support traditional theories of the normalisation of protest behaviour. In this paper we will examine whether more protest and more protesters also means more types of protesters on the streets. In other words, has this particular form of participation become more democratic? Has the normalisation of protest developed to produce a normalisation of the protester? Can we go so far as to say that the level of demonstration protest in a particular society reflects public opinion? If that is so, then it increases the relevance of Tilly's suggestion that research into collective action be treated as a rich source of information about the attentiveness, grievances and aspirations of the people (Tilly 1983). However, if growing participation in protest demonstrations can be attributed to the expanding activity of a small number of groups, critics are justified in criticising Tilly's theory on the ground that that collective action is a minority activity (Bogart 1983).

In theory, the normalisation of the protester can be attributed to two causes. First, collective action may increasingly involve cross-class collaboration among the population rather than a specific set of social groups. Second, normalisation could result from an increasing number of specific protests being staged by social groups which previously took to the streets only rarely. There may be more specific protests by lower-status groups (such as the less well educated, or the unemployed) and higher-status groups (such as executives and the liberal professions). Both possibilities will be explored further. In examining normalisation and democratisation, only the standard variables of age, level of education and gender were used. Collecting available data from various Western European countries and the United States, the analysis nevertheless draws mainly on information about protests and demonstrations in Belgium. In historical terms, the tradition of Belgian street protest is largely consistent with that of most other Western European countries: workers uprisings at the beginning of this century, student revolts in the late 1960s and more post-materialistic demonstrations during the last 30 years. In Belgium and other Western countries, political participation has never been limited to elections, and permanent dissent has become an essential part of Western democracies (Fillieule 1997).

We will elaborate our theory of the normalisation of the protester by using three different research methods: representative surveys carried out among the population, protest-event analysis and surveys performed at actual protests. Before concluding, we will zoom in on the White Movement, an important Belgian movement which repeatedly filled the streets in 1996 and 1997 and which serve to underline this protester normalisation theory.

The normalisation of the protestor

Traditional theories of the normalisation and institutionalisation of collective protest actions have been endorsed by scholars of social movements (Etzioni 1970; Tilly et al. 1975; Barnes & Kaase 1979; Fuchs 1990; Dalton 1996; Fillieule 1997; Rucht et al. 1998; Meyer & Tarrow 1998; McCarthy & McPhail 1998; della Porta 1999).[4] There is far less consensus on whether the normalisation theory of collective action can be extended to the participants in such collective action. Are the profiles of demonstrators different to those of the average man or woman in the street? And who is that (wo)man in the street anyway? According to Kaase & Barnes (1979), the growing number of all kinds of action groups and their enhanced legitimacy means that increasing numbers of citizens from all strata of society are being mobilised. Meyer & Tarrow (1998) speak of a 'generalisation' of the repertoire of contention across age groups, from men to women, and from workers and students to other social groups. However, Dalton (1996) fears that the unequal representation of citizens in conventional participation will be replicated in the form of unrepresentative protest behaviour. Well-educated higher-status groups are better represented both on and off the streets than less-educated groups, and growing collective action involvement will increase the political participation gap even further. Piven & Cloward (1991: 448) claim that the institutionalisation of protest behaviour has decreased the opportunities for lower-status challengers. 'Because elements of standardisation and routinisation were introduced and spontaneity declined [...] people must be able to muster the resources both to organise bureaucratically and to overcome the influence of other groups in regular political contests'. Since lower-status groups lack the resources required to set up an organisation, the number of higher-educated groups on the streets and their influence continues to grow. In other words, institutionalised protest is elitist.

Using the three research methods applied most widely to study collective action, we will examine whether there is a normalisation of the protester. The most obvious source of data is population surveys or, more specifically, political action studies which chart unconventional forms of participation. In addition, over the past twenty years a vast and impressive amount of international protest-event-data has been collected through newspaper and police archives. Finally, a new and relatively unknown method was also used: opinion surveys of those taking part in demonstrations.

Population surveys: are we all (potential) protesters?

Almond & Verba (1963) were probably the first to examine broader aspects of the political behaviour of citizens. In addition to studying voting beha-

viour, they also looked into other forms of social and political participation. However, their surveys did not explicitly ask respondents whether they participated in protest demonstrations. This changed after the publication of the authoritative *Political Action* by Barnes & Kaase (1979). They conducted an extensive survey in five Western democracies on attitudes for and against both conventional and unconventional forms of political participation. The action repertoire, ranging from signing petitions and lawful demonstrations to damaging property, has since become a permanent item in many national election studies (Anker & Oppenhuis 1995; Beerten et al. 1993, 1997) and World Values Surveys. The most significant finding of these political action researchers was that conventional and unconventional political behaviour were not opposites, 'but rather operate jointly' alongside each other.[5] The researchers further developed the so-called Socio-Economic Standard model (SES), emphasising age, gender and level of education as the most important variables explaining protest behaviour: protest is more the domain of the young than the old, of men rather than women; and of the well educated rather than the less well educated (Marsh & Kaase, 1979).

Although a follow-up study in the early 1980s confirmed the SES model (Jennings et al. 1990),[6] it also qualified the findings somewhat. It showed, for example, that in the course of the 1970s, women had started to catch up with men and that the gap between the young and the old had declined when one measures actual participation in unconventional actions in addition to protest intentions. According to Kaase (1990), older people are less likely to express support for street protests, but this reluctance can be overcome by efforts to mobilise them. Conversely, as far as education is concerned, evidence suggests that the level of education affects actual behaviour much more than behavioural intent (Kaase 1990). In a recent study, Verba et al. (1995) went a step further by calling education a crucial lever in the participation rates of American citizens, since it determines all other relevant characteristics such as income, skills acquired at work and in organisations, interest in politics, and so on. The strong relationship between levels of education and participation observed over the past twenty years is testimony to its structural nature. However, education and socio-economic status levels do not always affect all forms of political participation in the same way. It is interesting to note that in this study, levels of education had less impact on protest participation than on other more conventional forms of participation. Consequently, there is a degree of normalisation of protest. However, among protesters the needy remain underrepresented, leading Verba to conclude that in terms of levels of education, street protest has not been democratised. By contrast, this does not hold for gender roles: there was equal willingness among American men and

women to participate in a protest, march or demonstration in the two years prior to the survey (Verba et al. 1995).

Both Topf (1995) and Dalton (1996) concluded on the basis of a longitudinal analysis of unconventional political participation in Western Europe and the USA that, although the importance of the traditional variables (i.e., age, gender and level of education) was declining, it has not disappeared altogether. Each has looked at this conclusion from a different angle: while Topf stressed declining differences, Dalton emphasised continuing inequalities. Heunks (1996) concurred with Dalton on the basis of a comparison of the World Value Studies of 1981 and 1990: despite increasing levels of unconventional participation, the backgrounds of participants have remained stable. The data suggest, therefore, that while it is no longer far off, the normalisation of the protester has not yet fully come about. This conclusion also seemed to hold for Belgium in 1995: the correlation between educational levels and participation rates was still considerable. However, although young, male, and well-educated respondents were more willing to participate in lawful demonstrations, it would be wrong to dismiss altogether such participation among older people, women and the less educated. For example, 82 percent of 18 to 24 year olds are willing to participate in a lawful demonstration, among the over 65s this is 51 percent (Beerten et al. 1997).

The advantage of population surveys is that they allow cross-national and historical comparisons. One disadvantage is that they often measure the willingness to protest rather than the actual protest itself. As a result, there are no figures on actual rates of mobilisation. Moreover, such surveys do not distinguish between different protest issues. Declared willingness to participate in a demonstration is a poor indicator of actual participation in collective action. 'The action potential of individuals reflects not what they will do but what they think they ought to do' (Topf 1995: 59). Analysing the large peace marches held in the 1980s in the Netherlands, Klandermans & Oegema (1987) showed that out of a potential of 74 percent of the population, only 4 percent actually participated. Replications of the original political action research confirm that the potential protesters are not actual protesters. In considering actual behaviour,[7] the explanatory power of individual characteristics therefore decreases as a result of the influence of other, possibly situational, factors as well as the specific context of the protest. The main weakness of surveys is their inability to assess this context. Organised as well as informal networks are widely regarded as vital links for mobilisation.

The second political action study sought to address this shortcoming by asking questions assessing the social context of the collective action (Kaase 1990). However, this assessment of context was general and broad in scope: the questions asked only on whose initiative the respondent participated (self;

others; self and others) in a protest demonstration. It became clear that protesters rarely engage in a demonstration totally on their own initiative; they usually take to the streets on the initiative of others or on the basis of a joint initiative (Kaase 1990: 58). However, it was unclear who these 'others' were: were they friends, colleagues, unions, or the media? In addition to saying very little about the actual context of the protest, this survey method reveals very little about the specific issues which serve as the focus of the demonstration. Does every issue have its own public and do different issues have an effect on the profile of the protestor? According to Kriesi & Castenmiller (1987), there is no such thing as a general protest potential; the willingness to participate depends strongly on the actual issue. Kaase recognises that survey research has limitations as far as all these elements is concerned and should be supplemented by 'the study of concrete mobilisation processes' (Kaase 1990).

Protest event-analysis: which groups dominate the street?

Protest event analysis focusses on behaviour, i.e., the actual protest action itself (Diani et al. 1992; Rucht et al. 1998). Under the influence of the historical sociologist Charles Tilly, a group of researchers started drawing up inventories of all kinds of protest events (Rucht & Niedhardt, 1998). Necessity dictated their preference for newspapers as the main source of information (Koopmans 1995). Using police archives as additional source of information, has recently provided deeper insights into the biases and selectivity of newspaper-based data (McCarthy et al. 1996; Fillieule 1996).[8]

Despite numerous protest inventories in the various countries, results are usually limited in terms of time, geography or social movement. Protest event analysis is not sufficiently standardised to allow broad cross-national comparisons.[9] Consequently this analysis is confined to the results of our research on protest marches in Belgium in the 1990s and to Fillieule's (1998) study of protest events in France in the 1980s.[10] What do these studies reveal about street protesters? Participants were not identified individually but at the group level. Newspapers and police archives mainly provide information about the socio-professional characteristics of the participants (whether they were students, farmers, and so on). Since these characteristics are often described in terms of broad, general social groupings, overlap between the various categories is inevitable, making impossible proper comparison between the social composition of protesters and the population at large. Such data can only indicate the approximate extent to which certain socio-professional groups are over- or under-represented (Table 2)

In the introduction we stated that more socially mixed and representative protests pointed to a possible normalisation of the protester. One out of three

Table 2. Socio-professional categories of protest and protesters in Belgium 1990–1997, based on newspapers and police archives analysis

Socio-professional categories	Protests (%) (N = 2,994)	Protesters (%) (N = 3,109,628)	Average scale of protests
1. Salaried workers:			
Blue and white-collar workers	7.6	5.2	757
Civil servants	3.6	3.2	908
Teachers	7.7	10.4	1,400
Persons employed in the non-profit sector	3.8	2.8	775
Employees in general	9.4	8.6	957
Subtotal	*32.2*	*30.3*	*977*
2. Self-employed:			
Farmers	7.2	3.1	452
Small businesses	0.1	0.1	752
Liberal professions	0.3	0.1	177
Subtotal	*7.6*	*3.3*	*444*
3. Young people:			
College students	14.5	13.1	937
High-school students	6.1	4.8	817
Young people	2.3	2.4	1,077
Subtotal	*22.9*	*20.3*	*919*
4. Teachers + students	4.2	8.0	1,975
5. Economically inactive	0.6	0.4	792
6. Diverse socio-professional categories	32.5	37.7	1,206
Total	100	100	1,039

protest demonstrations in Belgium is made up of diverse socio-professional groups. The problem is that we have little or no information to assess the representative composition of these protests. Therefore only a very wide range of socio-professional groups would be an indication of the normalisation of the protester.

The greatest majority of protests are composed of protesters from a single socio-professional group. Salaried workers from both the state (above all civil servants and teachers) and private sector (blue and white-collar workers) are the largest of such groups, followed by young people. It is remarkable to note that the education sector is particularly well represented, both in the salaried

workers group and among young people. In the 1990s, those employed in the education sector and college and high school students made up 36 percent of Belgian protesters.[11] This was also true in France in the 1980s: "... the educational community has a highly developed 'protest culture' which not only manifests itself in times of crisis, but also at the most routine of times" (Fillieule 1998: 217). On a more general level, also in France the largest group of protestors can be clearly defined as belonging to a specific socio-professional category, namely blue-collar workers. Notwithstanding differences in numbers and size, it seems most professional categories are represented in some way or another, leading Fillieule to conclude that the categories of identified demonstrators cover almost all socio-professional categories. The recent demonstration held by French employers against the introduction of the 35 hour week appears to confirm this view. On 4 October 1999, two large employers' organisations mobilised approximately 25,000 bosses for a sit-in in the French capital (Le Monde, 5 October 1999). This unique action is a good example of the democratisation of protest activity. Does the fact that many different socio-professional groups take to the streets suggest that a radical normalisation of protester has taken place?

Not really. Some categories are and remain unrepresented on the streets. In Belgium, and probably also elsewhere, persons not actively engaged in the economy (pensioners, housewives, the unemployed) rarely take past in protests. Very much underrepresented[12] in the periods we studied earlier (Table 4), this group certainly has not made great strides in the years since. Isolation is the most obvious reason for the absence among protestors of persons not actively engaged in the economy, resulting from a lack of formal and informal networks and mobilising organisations. The majority of protests, and large demonstrations in particular, are initiated by one or more organisations. Fillieule observed that less than 7 percent of demonstrations in France in the 1980s were spontaneous.[13] The absence of strong organisations seems to affect mainly the actions of the 'non-active' group. In France the unemployed rarely succeed in mobilising more than 100 people to participate in a demonstration (Fillieule 1997).[14] Other professional categories are also underrepresented: higher-status groups, the self-employed, and executives. Presumably, these groups do not need protest marches to defend their interests and use other channels to make themselves heard.

Further evidence which seems to cast doubt on the normalisation of the protester comes in the form of the large fluctuations in the participation of certain socio-professional groups over course of time (Table 3). In Belgium in the 1950s, protests focused mainly on educational issues, pitting Catholics against secularists. This produced many mixed demonstrations. While the student revolts of the late 1960s are well known, the protest behaviour of young

Table 3. Socio-professional categories of protests and protesters in Belgium, 1953–1997

Socio-professional Categories	1953-1959 N = 1,398,606	1960–1967 N = 1,667,977	1968–1974 N = 1,714,980	1979–1984 N = 1,740,501	1990–1997 N = 3,109,628
Salaried workers	23.8	49.3	18.2	46.9	30.3
Self-employed	6.1	7.0	23.8	4.0	3.3
Young people	3.7	6.1	30.8	7.7	20.3
Non-actives	1.9	0.5	2.1	1.9	0.4
Various categories	64.5	37.1	25.1	39.5	45.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Sources: 1953–1974 (Smits 1984), 1979–1984 (Ulens 1994), 1990–1997 (Van Aelst & Walgrave 1999).

people has not remained stable since. In the early 1970s, the self-employed (mainly farmers) took to the streets in great numbers but their struggle also came to a standstill. Only the participation rates of salaried workers and the economically inactive remained more or less constant: high levels for the former group, low levels for the latter. The participation of certain groups therefore varies considerably and is strongly influenced by the issues dominating the political landscape. This data does not provide sufficient evidence to suggest that the social composition of those engaging in protest is increasingly coming to resemble that of the citizens as a whole. The normalisation of the protester therefore is subject to temporary political fluctuations rather than a secular trend.

However, these findings based on protest event-analyses have to be put into perspective since they have their limitations. The identification of participants is often vague, one-sided or narrow. Through newspaper reports and police records journalists and police officers asses the composition of a protest march on the basis of only a few characteristics (especially those reflecting socio-professional category) and their judgements are not always reliable. They tend to be based on their experience, which may or may not be extensive, of such protests or on data provided by the organisers. Journalists and police often tend to make reports that are biased towards confirming their expectations. At a protest organised by unions, they expect to see workers, and the chances are they will actually see a workers' protest. The same applies to mixed demonstrations. Perhaps this sort of inventory says more about the way protesters are perceived by newspapers and the police than about the actual composition of the protest itself. Although it is possible to identify groups as a whole, the precise composition of these groups nevertheless remains a mystery. We know nothing about the particular types of civil servants or workers taking part in the demonstrations. If several socio-

professional groups take to the streets, it is almost impossible to identify them further. Interviewing protesters during the actual protest can partly solve these methodological problems.

Interviewing protesters at demonstrations: towards personal identification

Interviewing participants at protest demonstrations is a relatively new technique. Favre et al. (1997) speak of 'a curious lacuna in the sociology of mobilisation'. To the best of our knowledge, this approach has only been used in a few studies. In 1979, Ladd et al. (1983) conducted interviews at a large anti-nuclear demonstration in Washington. Their objective was to identify the extent to which participants share common positions on ideological issues. When demonstrators in Sheffield took to the streets in 1983 to protest against the visit of Mrs Thatcher, the British prime minister, Waddington et al. (1988) conducted 300 interviews to document the socio-demographical profile of the protesters. However, neither gave much explanation about how the survey was set up and administered. Waddington stated: 'Our survey of the demonstrators, which was random in the literal rather than the scientific sense, provided a rough profile of the demonstrators' (Waddington et al. 1988: 29). In the beginning of 1994, Favre et al. (1997) carried out three surveys at large protest marches in France. Moreover they did set out their methodology: it was designed to give all participants an equal opportunity of being interviewed. Their method was refined further in the framework of our own research (Van Aelst et al. 2000). Because of its rather innovative character we will outline its basic principles.

We questioned a number of protesters at the four largest national Belgian protest marches held in 1998 using two methods. For the main part of the survey a dozen interviewers distributed approximately 700 questionnaires during the actual protest march itself, while a number of 'reference persons' ensured that the same number of rows was skipped throughout. The participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire at home and then to post it to us. This lengthy 10-page questionnaire was altered slightly to fit the circumstances of each demonstration, but most questions concerning the social background, the mobilisation context and political attitudes and values were identical. In addition to the mail survey, demonstrators were questioned orally before the protest set off. Each interviewer questioned at random around ten waiting demonstrators. These shorter face-to-face interviews were used primarily to evaluate the representativeness of the mail survey. While a response rate of 40 percent is very satisfactory for a mail survey with no reminders, nothing is known about the demonstrators who did not return their questionnaires. The fact that hardly anyone refused a face-to-face interview and that there are no significant differences between responses from the two types of interviews,

suggests some degree of reliability. Given the unpredictable nature of protest action, representativeness is still the main obstacle as far as this method is concerned. This is probably also why very few researchers have used the technique. However, our experiences show that with sound preparation and sufficient interviewers, a representative picture of the demonstrators can be obtained.

The four demonstrations were held in Brussels. They were: firstly, the Second White March (to protest the failings of the justice system in the Dutroux case); secondly, a national march against racism; thirdly, a protest by workers from the non-profit sector (such as nurses and carers of the handicapped, disabled, elderly and young people); and lastly, a demonstration organised by unions, mutual sickness funds and pensioners' organisations demanding higher social security benefits (including unemployment benefit, pensions and health care) and the preservation of the welfare state. 970 participants returned the mail survey and 340 were interviewed face-to-face. These data also have to be approached with caution: the range of issues giving rise to protest that it covers is not wide and therefore the figures may give a partial and temporary profile of the Belgian protester. A student or farmers' protest would no doubt have produced a different protester profile. Moreover, we only questioned participants from the largest demonstrations in that year, representing just one in ten of the total number of demonstrations, but nearly 20 percent of all demonstrators that year. The possibility that smaller, regional or local demonstrations would bring different kinds of people into the streets cannot be ruled out. Further research has to reveal whether the participants in smaller protest actions are less 'normal' than those taking part in the large national protest demonstrations.

What did these surveys say about the profile of protestors? Although protest is predominantly a male affair, recent political surveys have, as has been already mentioned, revealed that the gap between men and women is closing. When comparing protests, it became apparent that the gender of demonstrators depended strongly on the protest issue (Table 4). There appear to be male and female demonstrations. High numbers of women attended the demonstrations organised by the non-profit sector, a sector traditionally employing many women such as nurses, auxiliary nurses and geriatric assistants. In contrast, the anti-racist and social security demonstrations were predominantly male affairs. A French study noted the same findings at two similar protests (one against racism and another against unemployment), with 65 percent and 63 percent men respectively (Fillieule 1997). Remarkably, both genders were present in equal numbers at the Second White March. This march was held to protest against the failure of the justice system and in solidarity with the parents of children who had been murdered. It appealed to

all parents, mothers as well as fathers. Normalisation of the protester in terms of gender can probably be attributed both to the greater number of women in the workplace and the arrival of new, women's issues.

Anti-racism appears to be mainly the domain of people in their twenties (33 percent). After the anti-racism rally, the media unanimously spoke of a youth demonstration, but this has to be qualified since other age categories participated as well. The French anti-racist march of 1994, where attendance levels of people in their twenties reached 50 percent, was more markedly young. The non-profit protest was attended mainly by economically active people in their thirties and forties (70 percent). The social security demonstration appealed to a somewhat older audience and the Second White March was also able to mobilise people in their fifties (26 percent). Broadly speaking, the overrepresentation of the middle age category (30–49 years) is more noteworthy than that of younger people.

The educational level of participants at the four protests was higher than that of the average Belgian. This also applied to the demonstrations staged by the unions – not commonly regarded as organisations for the better-educated. The protest against racism had the best educated participants; 70 percent had at least a higher education diploma. The union march in support of social security had the highest number of citizens with lower levels of education, but even here the average level of education was higher than expected for a protest aimed at economically inactive people. Although Belgian unions succeeded in mobilising pensioners that day (22 percent), they failed to rally the unemployed (9 percent). The latter are always difficult to mobilise: loss of work often leads to a withdrawal from public life and the erosion of the personal networks essential for mobilisation (McAdam 1988). After the social security demonstration, the Second White March mobilised the most heterogeneous group in terms of educational levels. The numbers of people with university degrees and of those had only completed lower secondary school were almost equal. As a general rule educational levels vary in every demonstration. However, the better educated are always overrepresented and the less well educated are always underrepresented.

In addition to providing data on traditional socio-economic variables, these surveys enabled us to focus on the context of the mobilisation. Since organisations are still widely regarded as essential for successfully mobilising protesters (McAdam et al. 1996; Walgrave & Manssens 1998; McAdam 1988) we expected to see a high number of members of associations among the protesters. Table 4 confirms this: protesters tend to be active members of an association or union, and are more likely to be members of a political party than the average Belgian. In general, participants are twice as likely to be active than non-participants. The Second White March is the only demonstration

Table 4. Participants by gender, age, educational level and (active) membership

	Second White March	Anti-racism	Non-profit sector	Social security	Total	Population[a]
Gender						
Male	49.6	59.3	35.0	67.9	53.8	52.1
Female	50.4	40.7	65.0	32.1	46.2	47.9
Age						
18–28 years	9.9	32.8	15.8	12.3	19.9	21.2
30–39 years	14.1	21.4	33.4	25.6	25.3	19.6
40–49 years	37.2	23.9	36.6	27.3	30.1	17.4
50–59 years	26.4	14.6	12.6	18.0	16.1	14.0
60 plus	12.4	6.3	1.6	17.8	8.7	27.6
Educational level						
Primary school	8.1	2.0	4.8	14.6	6.8	20.1
Lower secondary	17.9	8.9	13.9	18.0	13.6	23.1
Higher secondary	30.8	19.1	30.8	36.1	28.0	29.0
Higher education	25.2	33.8	44.1	20.3	32.3	19.0
University	18.7	36.4	6.4	11.0	19.3	8.9
Membership						
Active[b]	38.0	78.6	48.6	71.0	63.7	37.0
Union member	42.2	49.8	89.2	91.6	70.0	33.5
Member of political party	17.1	25.3	17.2	32.9	24.1	10.6
	N = 123[c]	N = 457	N = 374	N = 355	N = 1309	N = 3668

[a] Source of population data: ISPO-PIOP, 1995.
[b] This means having participated in an activity or having attended a meeting of an association in the last 12 months.
[c] The low N-value of the Second White March is due to the fact that this survey, which was carried out before this project actually started, was less comprehensive and therefore less reliable, than the other three.

where average levels of membership of an association corresponded to that of the general population. The three surveys carried out in France in 1994 also point to a strong overrepresentation of people who belong to an organization.

The on-the-spot questioning of demonstrators reveals that every protest has a heterogeneous composition. However, the degree of heterogeneity and therefore the degree of representativeness, vary. This does not detract from the finding that the average protester is young or middle-aged, is economically active in work and educated. Demonstrators are distinguished by a much higher level of participation in political associations. Consequently, persons

who are well integrated in society as a result of their jobs and/or membership of an association, are much better represented on the street. This confirms the picture of the average protester produced by population surveys. The conclusion that the profile of the White March protester corresponds most closely to that of the average Belgian, provides a useful link for further developing and refining the theory of the normalisation of the protester.

The White March: Towards a new emotional movement?

In the autumn of 1996 Belgium's foundations trembled. A unique wave of protest engulfed the country and lasted almost a year. After the worrying disappearance of a number of children, their kidnapper and murderer was finally captured in August 1996. The Dutroux case was born. A while later, the little girls' bodies were found. It soon emerged that both the police and the justice system had seriously bungled the whole investigation. When the country's Supreme Court took the investigating judge who had caught Dutroux off the case, hell broke out. In the space of four days 500,000 people took to the streets and participated in hundreds of marches and rallies. Two days later, on 20 October 1996, the largest demonstration in Belgian history, marched through the streets of Brussels: 300,000 people took part in the White March, or 3 percent of the Belgian population. White Action Committees were set up all over the country, organising hundreds of local marches and mobilising an additional 200,000 protesters (Walgrave & Rihoux 1997). In 1996 and 1997 the White Protest was the largest of all protests (Van Aelst & Walgrave 1999). The second White March of February 1998 rode this wave of protest one more time. It was the last stand of the White movement before it ground to a complete halt (Walgrave et al. 1998).

The media emphasised that demonstrators taking part in the White March were an average cross-section of the Belgian population. People from all walks of life, regardless of gender, age and level of education participated. We already pointed out that newspapers are not always reliable when it comes to profiling protesters. Although there was not enough time to interview the actual participants of the White March, other data seem to suggest that the White Movement did indeed succeed in mobilising a surprisingly representative section of the population. The data on the second White March is useful in this regard. Moreover, we have additional data on the characteristics of White March protesters since we interviewed roughly 900 participants from 11 different local White Marches between March 1997 and June 1997 (Walgrave & Rihoux 1997; Walgrave & Rihoux 1998). Although we do not wish to assert that the social profile of the average local White March protester is identical to that of the average citizen, the heterogeneity, and therefore rep-

resentativeness, of the White Movement's rank and file is quite remarkable. The less well educated were again underrepresented, women were slightly over-represented and most people had one or more links with children, as parents or as professionals, but these deviations were too small and modest to result in a distinct profile. The Dutroux case mobilised the population as a whole, which is highly unusual for protest research, and the White Movement in Belgium is a clear example of the normalisation of the protester.

It seems some protest demonstrations are extremely mixed and capable of mobilising the average man and woman in the street. Two questions need to be asked here: how do such 'normal' protests arise? And, is it a typical Belgian phenomenon?

The most important explanation for the remarkable representativeness of the White March protests is that the media rather than social movements or interest organisations mobilised the masses. This feature of the White Marches has been discussed in more detail elsewhere (Walgrave & Manssens, 2000). As far as the first White March is concerned, there were no organisers to mobilise the rank and file. Since organisations usually defend the interests of a certain section of the population, and it is very rare for all social organisations to mobilise together, organised mobilisation only succeeds in getting a certain section of the citizenry on to the streets. In the run-up to the White March, the media, and especially the newspapers, took on the role of mobiliser. In contrast to interest organisations, the media did not target a particular section of the population, but the population as a whole. This was reinforced by the fact that the same message was being put out by all branches of the media and dissenting views were nowhere to be seen, heard or read. Being present at the White March was heralded as a deed of good citizenship: it was the duty of every man, woman and child to go to Brussels on that day. People were mobilised as citizens, not as workers, farmers or nature lovers. The White Movement was a consensus movement in the widest possible sense of the word. During the second White March, 16 months after the first, this media mobilisation was far less pronounced. Still, figures indicate that a much higher proportion of participants of the second White March (70 percent) were mobilised through the media than other demonstrations (between 1 and 7 percent).

How were the media able to mobilise the population so easily, when such an ability is usually associated uniquely with organized groups? The answer to this question lies in the character of the issue at stake in the demonstrations, the second possible explanation for the remarkable normalisation of the protester in the White Marches. The issues at stake – the quality of the courts and the justice system, better government and the place of children in modern society – were totally at odds with the major political and social cleavages

which have dominated Belgium's political life since at least the nineteenth century. The issues concerned and touched everyone, regardless of class. Furthermore, no demands were made at the White March: there were no slogans, banners, or anything else of that nature. Protesters sent out a vague message that 'things really couldn't go on like this' without stating precisely what had to change. The protest was driven by emotions: the motor was sympathy and solidarity with the parents of murdered and abused children. The citizens' ability to identify with the victims, ordinary people of flesh and blood, was a very powerful mechanism indeed (Walgrave & Stouthuysen 1998). Protest was anchored in their own personal environment: the victims could have been their children, grandchildren, or classmates. Personal concerns had become political.

Is the White Movement unique? Successful mobilisations in response to similar emotional events in other countries seems to suggest that the White Movement could be the forerunner of a new kind of mobilisation, or 'new emotional movement' (Walgrave & Stouthuysen 1998). A number of examples can help to substantiate this hypothesis. In Spain, the murder of the young politician, Angel Blanco, by ETA terrorists in July 1996, resulted in the greatest mobilisation of all time. In the UK, the brutal shooting of school children in Dunblane in March 1996, provoked a massive anti-gun movement. In the Netherlands, there were large waves of solidarity in 1997 and 1999 following the senseless killing of a young man for no apparent reason, and after two girls had been killed in similar circumstances. On 24 October 1999, an estimated 10 million Colombians took to the streets to protest against the violent fall-out of mounting warfare which was increasingly affecting civilians. Its peaceful, family nature, its sheer scale, the solidarity with the victims, the media support, the broad and vague non-consensus, the colour of white as symbol of innocence and other characteristics of protest bore a strong resemblance to the emotional marches held earlier in another part of the world. The slogan of the Colombian protest 'No mas!' was a copy of 'Basta ya!' used during the Spanish anti-ETA protest (both mean 'enough'). 'Enough is enough' was also the slogan of hundreds of thousands of participants at the 'million mom march' in Washington DC and several other American cities in May 2000. The march was a reaction to the many gun-related traumas endured in recent years in America. This enumeration is probably not complete. Although we have no overview of the socio-economic profile of participants at these protest marches, they could very well be based on the same heterogeneous and representative supporters. The British sociologist Frank Furedi (1997) called the common feature characterising these actions as the *politicisation of victimhood*. He theorised that victimhood is now surrounded by a whole ritual which is eminently suited for mobilisa-

tions in the modern risk society (Walgrave & Stouthuysen 1998; Walgrave & Rihoux 1998). The demonstrations are broad in scope because the theme of victimhood is not linked to age, gender or educational level. We believe that as increasing numbers of countries are confronted with such new emotional movements, the normalisation of the protester is now close at hand.

Conclusion: On the street we are all equal

Both collective protest and the way it is perceived have undergone a radical evolution in the twentieth century. As a result, Western countries experience almost daily a variety of protest actions and these have become an institutionalised part of the democratic power struggle. This is now taken so much for granted that the number of protest marches – in Belgium at least – has continued to rise relentlessly, and almost unnoticed, since the late 1960s. Peaceful protest is increasingly enjoying greater legitimacy not only among government elites but also by public opinion. In this paper we have sought to examine whether this normalisation of protest has also resulted in a normalisation of the protester. There are indications that this is indeed the case but the evidence is not unambiguous.

There is some evidence that points away from such a conclusion. Large-scale population surveys of the *Political Action* type revealed that the less well educated, the socially vulnerable or the needy, according to Verba, are strongly underrepresented. These general conclusions were confirmed by the two analyses of newspapers and police archives which demonstrated that those not actively engaged in the economy never or only rarely participated in specific demonstrations. It is possible that they took to the streets as environmental activists or anti-racists? Surveys of demonstrators carried out at actual protest marches belie this possibility: those with lower levels of education were repeatedly underrepresented at four large and widely divergent demonstrations held in Brussels in 1998.

The most obvious explanation is that those with less education are less likely to belong to an organisation or association (Verba et al. 1995; Dekker & van den Broeck 1996; Hooghe 1999).[15] The direct and indirect impact on participation in collective action of belonging to an organisation or association is beyond dispute. The direct impact results from the fact that associations and organisations are usually the motor driving street protest, and they mobilise their members first. However, even if they are not mobilised by their own organisation, members tend to have a greater propensity to take part in protests. This results from their so-called 'micro-mobilisation' context, i.e., the informal networks in which they move as a result of their membership (McAdam 1988). The interviews carried out at four Brussels protest marches

confirmed this: among protesters there were significantly more active members of an association, more members of a union and more members of a political party than in the population at large. The explanation that protest participation levels of those with less education are lower because they are less likely to be members of an association is perhaps somewhat tautological. They are also less likely to be members because they are less easily mobilised. Lower levels of involvement or interest in politics and greater feelings of powerlessness are viable explanations for the absence of lower status individuals (Gabriel 1996; Heunks 1996). The social isolation of people not actively engaged in the economy perhaps explains their reluctance to take to the streets even though they are the group standing to gain most from anti-government protest (Van Aelst & Walgrave 1999). Demonstrating is first and foremost a social affair. Only 7 percent of the protesters we interviewed had come to the protest on their own; the majority came with family, friends or colleagues. However, examining the reasons for this isolation would require additional research.

Notwithstanding this core of non-normalisation among Those with less education, population surveys indicate that the gap in terms of age, gender and education, has been closing over the past decades. In other words, there has been a social diffusion of protest. The lower forecasting potential of SES-variables has made way for situational variables. The protest level of people depends less on their age, gender and to a smaller extent, their education, than on the context of the mobilisation. In some circumstances, this mobilisation context can be very powerful and may tempt people who would not otherwise take to the streets. The Dutroux case in Belgium provided such an exceptional mobilisation context: almost 60 percent of the demonstrators interviewed admitted that they had never taken to the streets before and that participation in local White Marches was new to them (Walgrave & Rihoux 1997: 119). The number of first-time protesters was much lower (between 5 and 16 percent) at protests with a much less powerful mobilisation context. There are reasons for assuming that the frequency of such exceptionally powerful mobilisation contexts, targeting the general population rather than particular segments, is much higher than it used to be. The new emotional movements in other countries are testimony to this. More research will be needed to show whether such mobilisations are comparable and whether the ‘white wave’ of mobilisation in Belgium was unique. If such mixed forms of mobilisation are indeed increasing, the normalisation of the protester would be a matter of record.

A multitude of reasons explain why a powerful mobilisation context can now mobilise a more representative sample of the population than was possible before. There are fewer practical constraints (financial, transport, time)

and nearly everyone has access to protest. 'Softer' forms of protest policing and the general perception that protest is no longer regarded as physically dangerous are also important. The growing legitimacy of protest is also significant. It would seem that the political impact of protest is increasing: people are less inclined to toe the party line, issue voting has become more important, and politicians have become more sensitive and responsive to popular needs. It may also be due to changing protest issues. Symbolically such issues have become very highly charged. Being present at a demonstration becomes a goal in itself. Alternatively, taking to the streets in protest may be more attuned to the newer, looser forms of engagement which are not more permanent but variable and flexible: protest is a temporary event and does not require sustained participation. There is no doubt that the media, who occasionally turn out as fellow-travellers, have a growing impact on this process.

In conclusion, it would seem that at the end of the twentieth century the normalisation of the protestor has made such headway that we should accept Tilly's recommendation that we use research on collective action as a political barometer. Collective action is not just the domain of minorities. An increasing number of emotional mobilisations looks set to increase this trend of normalisation even further. However, the underrepresentation of those with less education and the less affluent prevents us from speaking about genuine democratisation of street protest.

Notes

1. In order to compare earlier studies in Belgium, we limited our protest event analysis to protest marches, i.e., collective protest actions in the streets going from point A to point B. As a result, sit-ins, meetings, riots and other forms of collective action are excluded. Due to their frequency, and high participation rates, such protest marches are the most representative forms of unconventional peaceful protest in Western Europe (Kriesi & Castenmiller 1987).
2. For the eight year period we used all full copies of two national newspapers: *De Morgen* (Dutch-speaking) and *Le Soir* (French-speaking). A more important source of information was the national police archive: nearly half of the number of demonstrations in our data-file stems from the police-archive and was not mentioned in *De Morgen* or *Le Soir*. These newspapers were the only source for about 30 percent of the demonstrations, while the remaining 20 percent of demonstrations were mentioned in both.
3. Bill Clinton's reaction to the street protest at the WTO conference of December 1999 in Seattle clearly illustrated the contrasting response to peaceful and violent protest: 'I condemn the small number who were violent and who tried to prevent the WTO delegates from meeting, but I am glad the others showed up. They represent millions of people who are now asking questions' (USA-Today, 2-12-1999).
4. Piven & Cloward (1991) are the only ones who oppose the view that protest is a normal form of less politics. They believe that protest falls outside normal politics and should

therefore be approached accordingly. However, their arguments are based on normative rather than on empirical evidence.

5. A German study from 1989 showed that this link had grown, albeit using only legal unconventional actions (petitions, demonstrations, citizen action groups). A factor analysis revealed that there is a stronger correlation between legal unconventional action and conventional actions than between legal unconventional action and civil disobedience (Fuchs 1990).
6. This study was replicated in three out of five countries in the period 1979–1981.
7. According to Topf, using the words 'would do' and 'have done' is problematic since the context of the former influences responses to the latter.
8. It seems that the scale of the protest action was the most important selection criterion used by the newspapers; many small actions go by unnoticed. The total under-estimation of the number of protests is therefore larger than the under-estimation of the number of protesters. Subjects and particularly events which capture the interest of the media are a difficult problem. Smaller actions on issues which attracted much attention are usually guaranteed media coverage.
9. Researchers of social movements and collective action are currently trying to fill in this lacuna. See, among others, della Porta et al. (1999).
10. Research on protest events in Germany (1950–1992) is not used because as far as we know, Rucht et al. have not yet reported on the participants of these actions.
11. Spending cuts mainly in the French speaking part of Belgium resulted in numerous street demonstrations by disgruntled teachers and students. The issue of education dropped out of the protest top five for only two years now. This picture does not apply only to the 1990s. Educational policy resulted in most protests between 1953–1974. Peaking during the broad ideological 'school wars' in the 1950s, students and educational staff nevertheless have regularly demonstrated (Smits 1984: 188–189).
12. Recent statistics reveal that just under 60 percent of the active population (aged 15–64 years) in Belgium is employed. The number of (job seeking) unemployed was 9 percent. The group of persons 'not actively engaged' in the economy comprises persons who have taken early retirement, the incapable of work, persons who have taken career breaks, housewives (or housemen) and students.
13. It is sometimes difficult to assess whether a demonstration has been formally organised. Demonstrations set up by a number of individuals (e.g., the parents of victims) were regarded as unorganised; when they were set up by a local action committee they were considered as organised.
14. In Marseilles, 78 percent of actions organised by the unemployed mobilised less than 100 participants, in Nantes this was as high as 92 percent.
15. A recent (1998) Belgian study revealed that the persons with the highest levels of education had an average membership of more than 1.33, than the least well-educated group. This disparity increases as participation in an organisation or association becomes more intense. The ratio rises to 2.62 with active membership and as high as 4.0 for membership of the movement elites (Hooghe 1999).

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Address for correspondence: Peter Van Aelst, Department of Social and Political Science, University of Antwerp, Universiteitsplein 1, B-2610 Wilrijk, Antwerp, Belgium
Phone: + 32 3 820.28.85; Fax: + 32 (0)3 820.28.82; E-mail: vanaelst@uia.ac.be