INTERVIEW

The Intrinsic Value of Protest

José Medina with Claudia Gâlgău

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Abstract: José Medina and Claudia Gâlgău discuss the epistemology of protest, epistemic self-empowerment and hope in the midst of persistent forms of oppression. "Social change and liberation often take many generations, and we need to cultivate sustainable communities of resistance that will not give up hope and will help people achieve recognition and dignity, and even flourish, amid structural forms of oppression."

Keywords: activism, epistemic empowerment, epistemic friction, epistemic injustice, protest movements

Practices of public protest are important for sustaining a healthy democracy and ensuring its legitimacy. Yet protests have systematically been misrepresented in public discourse as forms of disruptive noise or uncivil threats. As Judith Butler (2015) notes, there is always one thing true about a public demonstration: the police are already there, or they are coming. Dr. José Medina, Walter Dill Scott Professor of Philosophy at Northwestern University, studied both the public and internal life of protest movements for his book *The Epistemology of Protest* (2023).

To protest means in part to engage with instrumental questions of how best to achieve equality and justice for all. Yet Medina argues that protest is equally valuable as a practice of epistemic self-empowerment that heightens the epistemic agency of participants in unique ways. His book further discusses strategies to "engineer attention" toward issues of injustice (Saint-Croix 2025). It also offers a systematic analysis of the duties related to protest and the types of silencing practices that protesters face.

Growing up in Spain during the Franco dictatorship, Medina became inspired by the political philosophies of queer and feminist activists. As

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a graduate student in philosophy, he found himself primarily interested in the communicative failures and dynamics of ignorance that sustain political power imbalances. But, at that time, the literature on practices of silencing and miscommunication was scarce. "From Linda Alcoff and María Lugones I learned how to create a dialogue between feminist theory and political epistemology, especially using Latina feminism, to connect issues of gender and sexuality with political questions concerning public (mis)communication, mutual (mis)understanding and the role of the social imagination in mediating our interactions," says Medina. Over the years, he has contributed to a wide range of philosophical debates in queer, feminist and critical race theory, communication theory, political epistemology, and political philosophy.

His book *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2013) discusses political issues of misunderstanding and imaginative resistance. It was awarded the North American Society for Social Philosophy Book Award and has become a landmark reference for philosophical endeavors that study epistemic marginalization and resistance. *The Epistemology of Protest* further develops Medina's framework by focusing on the distinct epistemic phenomena and types of agency that arise through practices of protest. In a digital correspondence, we discussed how practices of protest allow people to find dignity and hope even in the midst of persistent forms of oppression.

Claudia Gâlgău (CG): What are two core insights you gained from studying protest movements?

José Medina (JM): One of the key insights of the book is about the intrinsic value of protest as a mechanism for transforming sensibilities and for creating and sustaining critical publics or communities of resistance that didn't exist before. Studying the communicative dynamics of protest movements led me to question the instrumental view of protest that is prevalent in political science. That is, the view of protest as a mechanism of public persuasion, according to which protests are only successful and valuable if they manage to persuade institutions and the public about their causes. But, in fact, protests do much more than that. They are ways of developing critical consciousness about injustice, ways of cultivating new sensibilities and practices of resistance, and ways of mobilizing people to be part of a community that fights for inclusion and freedom for all.

Another core insight of the book is that the kind of interrogation that protest can achieve should not be tamed and constrained by the dominant communicative epistemic sensibilities. The kinds of friction – including what I call *epistemic friction* – that protesters can produce are very

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frequently blocked and undermined. This is especially true when protesters challenge the status quo and their voices and perspectives come from the margins. Social transformation and liberation require protest actions and sustained protest movements, which often have to be confrontational and will be perceived as "uncivil." My book offers a systematic account of the many ways in which protesters' voices are silenced. It also discusses ways to resist the different forms of silence and social invisibility that marginalized subjects experience when they mobilize and try to protest.

CG: You introduced the concept of *epistemic friction* in your book *The Epistemology of Resistance* and have returned to it in *The Epistemology of Protest.* What phenomenon does it describe, and how has the concept deepened or changed over time?

JM: Epistemic friction happens when different horizons of understanding or epistemic frameworks interrogate each other's presuppositions. This mutual interrogation has the potential to make one critically aware of the limitations and biases of one's perspective. What I realized more fully after I wrote *The Epistemology of Resistance* is that epistemic friction has a crucial affective component. The deep interrogation it involves requires affective friction that can undo numbness or insensitivity to criticism. People need to feel moved to interrogate themselves and consider new ways of thinking, feeling, and relating to each other. The affective component of epistemic friction can also undo the negative emotions that people tend to feel when they are questioned, such as fear and antipathy. This means that epistemic friction requires not only an intellectual interaction in which people challenge each other but also practical activities of contestation that involve affective and aesthetic components. The die-ins of ACT UP or Black Lives Matter, and the kiss-ins of Queer Nation are examples of protest tactics that engage the affective dimension of epistemic friction.

In *The Epistemology of Protest,* I started to examine the role of art in moving us, making us feel, and making us overcome our insensitivity and numbness to forms of injustice that tend to remain invisible and inaudible. I discuss how public art and street performances have been used in resistance movements to break social silences and overcome forms of social invisibility. For example, the die-ins of Ni Una Menos in Latin America call attention to the social invisibility of femicide and the systematic violence against women. Art has a special capacity for making critical use of our affective reactions. It induces in us a kind of disorientation or perplexity that can be productive for interrogating our presuppositions and helping us remake ourselves and our communities.

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CG: How has your research into protest and the epistemologies of resistance shaped your sense of hope or political agency in the face of a seemingly insurmountable political, technological and economic elite?

JM: It has definitely heightened my sense of hope. One of the running themes in my work is how to empower the epistemic agency of people through grassroot social movements, and how to fight against the control of communication dynamics and public discourse by the elites of disproportionately empowered classes and institutions. Practices of epistemic self-empowerment for and by the people are of central interest in my work on protest and social movements. They are crucial in the resistance against the increasing control that elites, especially economic and technological powers and monopolies, have over the public sphere. I am particularly interested in how grassroot social movements create sustainable communities of resistance that empower people at the local level. Communities of resistance can offer hope for a dignified life, even when forms of systematic oppression are not receding and continue to constrain social life. I hope my work sheds light on the importance of micro-resistance and micro-politics. It is important to cultivate local communities of resistance as well as global networks that connect those communities. Social change and liberation often take many generations, and we need to cultivate sustainable communities of resistance that will not give up hope and will help people achieve recognition and dignity, and even flourish, amid structural forms of oppression.

CG: What are some aspects that make local resistance communities sustainable?

JM: The epistemic side of this has to do with the cultivation of a public voice and the epistemic resistance against false narratives and distorted forms of visibility/audibility. For example, at the height of the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, queer communities that had been formed to fight homophobia and create safe spaces in American cities could mobilize to offer protection to HIV/AIDS patients. They were able to fight against the social and institutional inattention to the pandemic. Organizations such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) were created and sustained over time to empower the community. ACT UP has been a vibrant international, grassroots political group with local chapters across the globe working to end the AIDS pandemic. But ACT UP groups were also succeeded by other local grassroot organizations, such as the local chapters of Queer Nation fighting against homophobic and transphobic violence in the 1990s. In this way, communities of resistance were sustained over

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time to fight against different problems and forms of injustice that queer publics faced. Another example of a sustainable community of resistance can be found in the local chapters of Black Lives Matter. They were created with a focus on racist police brutality, but they also grew and were expanded to call attention to other forms of racial violence and institutional racism, addressing a host of other issues that black and brown people face, including vulnerability to deportation, incarceration, and economic exploitation.

CG: There appears to be an inverse relationship between structural vulnerability and the ability to protest. Artist and author Johanna Hedva (2020) asks in the essay "Sick Woman Theory": "How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?" To paraphrase this question, what are practices of epistemic self-empowerment that even someone with very little structural resources can take part in?

JM: A good example can be found in the Me Too movement when women started using social media to support each other's testimony of sexual abuse, epistemically empowering their voices and demanding credibility. Another example is the visibility actions or Pride actions in the queer movement. Coming out is itself an activity of self-empowerment, of achieving visibility and fighting against social stigmatization and shame with pride. What we know now as Pride marches or Pride festivals started as groups of people coming out as LGBTQ+ in public to fight their social invisibility and silence. While doing so, they were empowering each other's voices. There were all kinds of empowerment actions that grassroots queer activists did in small groups, such as the same-sex kiss-ins of Queer Nation. Today, there are many visibility and Pride actions that queer people do online through social media, without needing the support of organized activism and without having to endanger their lives or their reputations if they live in queer-phobic communities.

CG: Critical social epistemology discusses many ideas that have traditionally been topics in political philosophy and ethics, such as justice, inclusion, and deliberation. Where does the work of the political philosopher and that of the critical social epistemologist diverge?

JM: They really are complementary, and, in fact, it is not surprising to find more convergence and collaboration between these subdisciplines. The strong overlap is in the ethics and politics of knowledge. The critical social epistemologist looks at these aspects from the perspective of epistemic harms and obstacles to knowledge acquisition and knowledge

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sharing, and the political philosophers look at them from the perspective of communication and the flow of knowledge in a just society and its institutions. There are technical aspects of the process of knowledge acquisition and knowledge sharing that are not of central interest in ethics and political philosophy. Likewise, there are technical discussions of democracy and its institutions that are not of central interest in social epistemology. But dialogue and collaboration between these subdisciplines of philosophy is very much needed, and it was long overdue.

There have been many political philosophers especially influential for my development as a publicly engaged philosopher and for my research interests in resistance, activism, and social movements. I would highlight W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., Michel Foucault, and Angela Davis. There are also many contemporary philosophers who are also public intellectuals I have had the privilege to know and learn from. They have had a tremendous impact on my work and include Linda Alcoff, María Lugones, Fernando Broncano, Naomi Scheman, Carlos Thiebaut, Iris Marion Young, and Charles Mills. Charles was a mentor and dear friend to me until his death. He was also an activist and a party organizer before he moved from Jamaica to Canada to become one of the most influential philosophers of race. *The Epistemology of Protest* is dedicated to him, to honor his memory and acknowledge my debt to him.

José Medina is Walter Dill Scott Professor of Philosophy at Northwestern University. His latest book is *The Epistemology of Protest: Silencing, Epistemic Activism, and the Communicative Life of Resistance* (Oxford University Press, 2023). E-mail: jose.medina@northwestern.edu

Claudia Gâlgău is a PhD fellow at the Centre for Research in Political Philosophy and Ethics at KU Leuven. She works on topics in social and political philosophy, social epistemology and social ontology with a special interest in migration justice. E-mail: claudia.galgau@kuleuven.be

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