INJUSTICE SYMBOLS: ON THE POLITICAL-CULTURAL OUTCOMES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Abstract
The paper argues for the fruitfulness of studying political symbols from an outcome perspective. Within the political sociology of social movements injustice symbols are of particular interest. Injustice symbols are empirical “objects”, e.g. individuals, photographs, places, events, that involve human suffering and violence and over time are infused with wider injustice meanings for a certain collective. This is a broad category. The emphasis in this paper is on violent person-events and how such events are transformed into individual injustice symbols. The guiding argument is as follows: while individual injustice symbols are formed in and through political activism they often subsequently acquire a social and political presence and stability that makes it relevant to view them from an outcome perspective. In a more political sociological formulation, we may say that they become part of the collective memory and imaginary of a collective. The paper offers three analytical lenses for addressing this observation: (1) the visual “form” of individual injustice symbols: (2) their displacement across time, space, and domains; (3) and their often contested nature. It draws on three recent cases for illustrative purposes: Neda Agha Soltan, Iran 2009; Khaled Said, Egypt 2010, and Mohamed Bouazizi, Tunisia, 2010.

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INTRODUCTION

The literature on social movement outcomes has been primarily concerned with policy (e.g. Gamson 1975; Giugni and Yamasaki 2009), biographical (e.g. Giugni 2004; McAdam 1999; Sherkat and Blocker 2007), and media (e.g. Gamson 1998) effects. Less attention has been devoted to the cultural outcomes of social movements. In her useful review of culturally oriented studies of social movement outcomes, Earl (2004) pays significant attention to symbolic outcomes. Yet the concept of symbol proves dangerously slippery in her account. In a tour de force of only four pages symbolic outcomes are identified in relation to such diverse phenomena as media coverage, visuals, folk music, fashion, cultural practices, language, and discourse (pp. 511-14). Perhaps caricaturing slightly, symbolic outcomes seem to become an almost residual category comprising everything that is not directly political. My objective in this paper is not to advocate for a narrower conception. I accept that, historically and disciplinarily, the term “symbol” is both open and contested. What I do contend, however, is that if it is to have any analytical purchase in the discussion of social movement outcomes it should be employed with the utmost definitional care and precision. I hope to be able to heed this advice by focusing attention on what I call injustice symbols. Preliminarily defined, injustice symbols are empirical “objects”, e.g. individuals, photographs, places, events, that have come to embody a notion of injustice for a collective. This is a broad category indeed. The emphasis in the present paper will be on what I call violent person-events and how such events are transformed into individual injustice symbols (for other applications of the injustice symbol concept, see Olesen 2011, forthcoming, a). With the concept of injustice symbols I seek two ends: first, in coupling symbols with injustice I wish to stamp a decidedly political dimension onto the study of symbols (an element that is sometimes lost or unclear in usages such as those referred to above); and, second, in light of the lack of systematism identified earlier, to reserve the term symbol for a delimited class of events and phenomena.

The following three cases illustrate what I have in mind when I speak about individual injustice symbols: In June 2009, the photo documented and globally circulated shooting of Neda Agha Soltan, a protester in the Green Revolution in Iran, captured and focused the world’s attention (Olesen, forthcoming, b). In Egypt, Khaled Said, a young man beaten to death by police in
June 2010 became a key injustice symbol in the formation of protest against Mubarak when images from the morgue taken by his family appeared on the Internet (Olesen 2013a). And in Tunisia, Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in December 2010 was widely credited with initiating the protests that toppled the Ben Ali regime in 2011 and set in motion the string of events commonly referred to as the Arab Spring (Olesen 2013b). The discussions in the present paper are mainly conceptual-theoretical but employ these cases throughout for illustrative purposes. While individual injustice symbols are definitely not a historically new phenomenon (for example, the struggle against Apartheid produced several well-known symbols such as Steven Biko, a South African anti-Apartheid activist killed in police custody in 1977, and Hector Pieterson, a young student killed during the Soweto uprising in 1976), their centrality in many of the political protests that we have seen over the last couple of years indicates that they may be of increasing importance in the contemporary political world. This may have to do with the fact that the formation and circulation of individual injustice symbols and other kinds of political memes (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) are significantly facilitated by two types of media technology: portable devices with visual documentation functions and social media that enable rapid dissemination via vast global interpersonal networks.

In order to appreciate the relevance of individual injustice symbols for a discussion of social movement outcomes a few foundational arguments must be made at the outset. Individual injustice symbols do not come ready made into the political world. The world is full of violent person-events that never acquire symbolic status. The decisive ingredient is agency. It is in the process of political appropriation that the event is infused with the universalizing meanings that give it symbolic significance. For a symbol to achieve wider resonance this initial meaning infusion must furthermore be actively acknowledged and confirmed by audiences in the national and/or global public sphere. When these two elements combine the individual is in a sense de-individualized and the factuality of the event superimposed with symbolic meanings. It is at this point we can begin to think about individual injustice symbols as outcomes. The superimposition of meaning integrates the violent person-event in the collective memory and imagination of society (this can be conceived of in local/national as well as global terms), transforming it into a malleable ideational resource available to both contemporary and future
social and political actors. The paper develops this argument through three themes: (1) the visual “form” or carriers of individual injustice symbols: (2) their displacement across time, space, and domains; (3) and their often contested nature. In order to create a firm conceptual-theoretical grounding for these discussions I initially offer a definition of the injustice symbol concept and an attempt to situate it in a political-cultural understanding of social movements.

INJUSTICE SYMBOLS
A symbol, in the words of Elder and Cobb (1983: 28-29), is “any object used by human beings to index meanings that are not inherent in, nor discernible from, the object itself”. What Cobb and Elder’s definition precisely outlines is that a symbol always in some sense points beyond itself; that the particularity of the background object has acquired a surplus of meaning and undergone a process of socialization and universalization. Based on this general definition of symbols an injustice symbol may be defined as formed on the basis of “objects” such as empirical events/situations and individuals that involve human suffering and violence and over time (this time frame can be both short and long term) are infused with wider injustice meanings. The focus in this chapter, as noted earlier, is on individual injustice symbols (e.g. Olesen 2013a, b, forthcoming, b). Violence against individuals considered innocent, decent, and thus undeserving of violence is at the root of all individual injustice symbols. Individual injustice symbols thus consist of two basic empirical elements: a specific individual (object) and the violence that this individual has suffered (event). The sum of these parts is referred to here as a violent person-event. A Violent person-event does not automatically become an individual injustice symbol, but only constitutes its “material” basis (see below for elaboration).

Violent person-events have the potential to arouse moral shock (Jasper 1997; Jasper and Poulsen 1995) in an audience. Moral shocks can have various sources: for example, it can derive from violence against individuals with pronounced innocence status (e.g. children; Sznaider 2001); from graphic visual documentation of violence (Hariman and Lucaites 2007); and from the character of the violence (e.g. torture and mutilation). Often violence is committed by state authorities, such as military or police, but perpetrators may also be non-state actors, fellow citizens, and even the individual him or herself (this is primarily the case
with self-immolation; see Olesen 2013b). What is decisive, then, for injustice symbol formation is not the perpetrator but whether the violent person-event can be universalized, i.e. linked to a social, cultural, and/or political problematic with structural roots. In this sense, injustice symbols are always shaped in interaction with existing injustice frames (Gamson et al. 1982) in society. As noted earlier, the formation of injustice symbols requires agency. As a result we cannot expect to explain the formation of injustice symbols only by pointing to the intrinsic “qualities” of the violent person-event. These qualities might facilitate symbol formation, but the active ingredient is agency. The main agents in the formation of injustice symbols are political activists and the media. While driven by different logics (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Rucht 2004), media and political activists often interact, if rarely intentionally and planned, in the production of injustice symbols (Greer and McLaughlin 2010). For political activists, violence against innocent individuals offers important opportunities to dramatize and publicly expose issues already on their agenda. For the media violence corresponds with well-established news criteria such as conflict, drama, sensation, and personalization (e.g. Bennett 1983/2005). Perpetrators or actors considered directly or indirectly responsible for the violent person-event may also, if often inadvertently, contribute to the formation of an injustice symbol. Paradoxically, this occurs precisely when attempts are made to de-symbolize violent person-events by denying, concealing, or manipulating the event (see Hess and Martin 2005).

As indicated in the introduction I think of injustice symbols as political-cultural phenomena. What I wish to flag with this constellation is that there is no necessary contradiction or incompatibility between political and cultural approaches to the study of movement outcomes. Many reviews of the outcome literature operate with a distinction between political and cultural aspects of movement outcomes (e.g. Earl 2004; Giugni 2008). While heuristically useful it becomes somewhat artificial in the case of phenomena such as injustice symbols. Injustice symbols grow out of politics and political conflict and are often employed for political purposes. Yet from an outcome perspective they are also cultural in the sense that they are, or rather become, socially anchored carriers of collective memories and values that may be mobilized by social and political actors at any time and for a variety of purposes. This basic argument has a number of implications for the discussion of outcomes. When we speak about
social movement outcomes it may sometimes give the impression that we are dealing with the end product of movement activism. While this may make some sense in the case of political outcomes (e.g. a policy change) we need to approach political-cultural outcomes such as injustice symbols with a decidedly dialectical sensitivity. As noted above, injustice symbols are typically formed in interaction with socially anchored injustice frames (Gamson et al. 1982). Put differently, they are constructed on the basis of ideational “materials” already available in society (Hart 1996; Williams 2004). This is only one side of a complex and dynamic equation, however. Because once constructed injustice symbols themselves become integrated in the political-cultural structure of society (Alexander 2006). This dialectical dynamic is nicely captured by Williams (2004: 101): “Movement activity thus ‘enacts’ culture and provides the precedent and reference that affects future efforts at cultural sense-making”. As such symbolic formation is a decidedly collective and public process. To sum up these points in perhaps slightly awkward terms, social movements are simultaneously “consumers” and “producers” of political-cultural meaning (d’Anjou and Van Male 1998).

OUTCOMES
The following discusses individual injustice symbols as outcomes under three rubrics: the first considers the visual “carriers” of such symbols; the second points to the capacity of symbols to “move” between spatial levels, historical periods, and domains; the third discusses their often contested nature. The discussions draw on the cases of Khaled Said, Mohamed Bouazizi, and Neda Agha Soltan (see the introduction) for illustrative purposes.

Carriers
Arguing that injustice symbols can be thought of as outcomes immediately raises questions about the “form” that these outcomes take. There are several possible routes to exploring this. In relation to the category studied here, individual injustice symbols, I wish to emphasize the role of photographic documentation and visual carriers of injustice symbols. This is not to say of course that individual injustice symbols can be reduced to their visual expression (nor that they always have a visual dimension). Yet it is notable how powerfully photographs orient our individual and collective memory and analysis and understanding of events. "With their
enormous capacity to contain, compress, and symbolize events or ideologies", says Goldberg (1991: 135) “photographs become the signs and signposts of modern society” (see also Batchen et al. 2012; Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Sontag 1979, 2003; Zelizer 2010). This is precisely what makes them relevant from an outcome perspective. Photographs become part of collective political memory and culture as they condense certain periods, events, and often also notions of injustice related to and/or derived from such periods and events. The power of visuality must be grasped at two levels in particular: the first relates to the way new media technologies facilitate visuality and photographic documentation; the second to the potential of photography in generating moral shock and indignation.

*Citizen journalism and technology*

Two types of media technology are notable here. On the one hand the fact that everywhere today citizens carry technological devices with documentation facilities (smartphones and tablets) that enable them to act as citizen journalists (Greer and McLaughlin 2010). On the other the presence of social network technologies that create vast communicative interfaces facilitating the spread of symbols and memes (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Both dimensions and their combinatory potential were evidenced in Iran in 2009. On 20 June 2009 in Tehran, Neda Agha Soltan, a 26-year old woman, joined thousands of others in protests (also referred to as the Green Revolution) following the 12 June Iranian presidential elections (considered by many to have been fraudulent). During the protests, her music teacher, Hamid Panahi, accompanied Neda. The two were heading back to their car as Neda fell to the ground from a gunshot. A 48 seconds long cell phone video recorded by a bystander shows the collapsed Neda being attended to by her music teacher and a doctor, Arash Hejazi, a fellow protestor and, later, a key witness and source in journalistic accounts of the event. In the chaotic and low-quality footage Panahi is heard screaming “Neda, stay with me”. A few minutes later Neda dies at the scene (Assmann and Assmann 2010). Fellow protestors immediately identified a Basij militiaman as the shooter and dragged him from his motorcycle. In the chaos of the event he was eventually released by the crowd (BBC 2009) and no charges have ever been pressed by authorities against this or any other individual. The 48-seconds video was uploaded to YouTube and Facebook by an Iranian asylum seeker in
Holland who was contacted by a friend in Iran who had accidentally recorded Neda’s death (Tait and Weaver 2009) and inadvertently become a citizen journalist (Andén-Papadopoulos 2013; Mortensen 2011). Another, shorter video recorded by an anonymous person zooms in on Neda’s face and shows profuse bleeding from her nose and mouth covering her face. What is particularly powerful about the videos is their extreme intimacy, zooming in on Neda’s face as blood streams out from her mouth and nose, creating a chaotic pattern across her face. Within hours the videos were circulating the globe via YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (Assmann and Assmann 2010). From the social networks, they rapidly made their way into the mainstream media, creating a global moral outcry (Mortensen 2011: 7). Today YouTube in particular contains a staggering amount of videos either showing the footage in its raw form or using it for artistic and/or political purposes (see also the discussion below). YouTube in this sense serves a global memory archive in which Neda is commemorated as well as renegotiated and transformed as the footage is continuously employed in new contexts.

Innocence and identification
The power of photography lies in its ability to generate moral shock in an audience. Moral shock is of course first and foremost based on photographs or video showing violence or the consequences of violence. Yet it is often amplified through the public circulation of “normal” photographs that show us what victim looked like before the violence was committed. Continuing the case of Neda the two most widely circulated photographs of this kind show Neda looking directly at us, smiling beautifully, in one of them with her hand under her cheek and in the other with her head slightly bowed to one side. The juxtaposition of the “normal” photographs with the videos of her death has three effects: First, the emotional and moral distance between the smiling Neda and the dying Neda covered in blood is immense and almost unbearable; second, the photographs support claims for innocence that are always central in the formation of injustice symbols; third, they offer a powerful contrast to the regime considered responsible for her death (visually, the Iranian regime is associated with veiled women and the stern and bearded faces of Iran’s male only politicians and clerics) (see Olesen, forthcoming, b, for a more detailed discussion). A related dynamic occurred in the case of Khaled Said in Egypt. As briefly mentioned in the introduction Khaled Said became a
core injustice symbol in the Egyptian Revolution. Based on a horrifying cell phone photograph taken by Said’s family at the morgue and uploaded to the web Said was transformed into a powerful injustice symbol for Egyptian protesters (Olesen 2013a). As in the case of Neda, this photograph was soon accompanied by a pre-death photograph of Said. In this we see a well-groomed, informally dressed, kind and intelligent looking young man. While the post-mortem photograph is evidently the most shocking and sensational of the two these “qualities” are amplified by and in the dual viewing situation. The “normality” and “innocence” of the pre-death photograph underlines and contextualizes the extreme and morally shocking nature of the post-mortem photograph. Often, during protests, the pre-death photograph appeared “alone” on banners and artwork. Yet even when appearing alone the pre-death photograph was interpreted, so to speak, via the post-mortem photograph, widely known by the Egyptian public, and thus largely derived its moral-political significance from this. The two photographs, in other words, dialectically infused each other with moral and political meaning.

**Displacements**

A key approach to thinking of injustice symbols as outcomes is to consider the extent to which they undergo *displacement*. This can be identified in several ways, which often combine. *Temporal displacement* refers to the employment of a symbol in new historical context. What is important here is not the temporal distance, but rather that the symbol is invoked in relation to events other than those that originally produced it. *Spatial displacement* refers to the employment of a symbol in a new geographical context. *Domain displacement* refers to the integration of the symbol in non-activist fields, e.g. art, journalism, and institutionalized politics. Such displacements are central to a discussion of outcomes because they testify to the symbol’s political-cultural anchoring and its transformation into an ideational resource available to and constantly recreated by social and political actors.

*Temporal displacement*

In his analysis of the Holocaust as a cultural trauma and memory, Jeffrey Alexander (2004: 247) argues that an event’s integration into political culture is evidenced by its employment in *analogical bridging*. From an injustice symbol perspective, analogical bridging occurs when a
current event is “compared” with a past event (whose injustice is undisputed) to emphasize the injustice of the current event and to strengthen the legitimacy of claims related to that event. Alexander thus shows how, for example, the Holocaust was frequently invoked during the Balkan Wars in order to put these events into historical perspective. More recently, advocacy for political-military intervention in Darfur often drew on the 1994 Rwanda genocide as a moral-political reference point: “not another Rwanda” (Olesen 2012). Similarly, the term Apartheid is frequently used in relation to Israel’s presence in Gaza and the West Bank. Analogical bridging does not necessarily have a long-term perspective such as in these examples. As noted earlier Khaled Said became a rallying point and visual injustice symbol for protesters in the lead-up to the Egyptian Revolution. What is interesting from a temporal displacement perspective, however, is Khaled Said’s continued resonance in post-revolutionary Egypt. Issam Atallah (Safieddine 2011), Elsayed Belal (We Are All Khaled Said 2011), and Essam Ali Atta (Rodríguez 2011) are only a few examples of victims of police brutality and/or torture in post-revolutionary Egypt who have been termed as a “new” or “another” Khaled Said. The case of Essam Ali Atta is of particular interest. In late October 2011 his fate became a rallying point for protests against the military council that had been ruling Egypt since the fall of Hosni Mubarak. For protestors gathering in the Tahrir Square Atta’s death testified that even if Hosni Mubarak had gone violent police practices persisted under the military council. From a symbolic point of view it is noteworthy how Atta’s and Khaled Said’s fates were symbolically connected through the presence of Khaled Said’s mother, Leila Marzouk, during the protests in the Tahrir Square (Abdellatif 2011). A recurring discursive pattern in temporal displacement of this kind is a moral-political indignation that the “original” victim has died in vain. Having achieved a more or less uncontested (see also the section below on meaning contestation) injustice status this victim comes to function as a moral-political benchmark for the judgment of subsequent violent person-events.

Spatial displacement

Many instances of temporal displacement also involve spatial displacement. Returning to some of the examples in the preceding section Apartheid is, for example, first and foremost a South African experience and injustice symbol. Yet the fact that it is routinely employed by
non-South African actors and in relation to events/situations in other geographical contexts than South Africa is a testament to its capacity for spatial displacement. Spatial displacement typically involves some degree of meaning adaptation as the symbol is interpreted through the filters of the new local/national contexts. Of the three cases discussed here the case of Neda has the strongest global dimension. Whereas Khaled Said and Mohamed Bouazizi were local/national symbols before they acquired global visibility and resonance Neda almost circumvented the national level to become an instant global injustice symbol (Olesen, forthcoming, b). The global reception of Neda occurred through what might be labeled an Iran interpretive package (the term interpretive package builds on Gamson and Lasch 1983 and Gamson and Modigliani 1989). The Iran package is constituted by a number of themes that create a moral-political dichotomy between Iran and mainly Europe and the United States: religious-secular; oppression/control-freedom; democratic-nondemocratic; rational-irrational. The operation of these themes were visible on at least four levels: first, Neda and her death was placed in a wider historic and global struggle for democracy and human rights in which Iran was cast as a negative “other”; second, the themes in the package were confirmed, as it were, by the Iranian regime itself as it denied any responsibility for Neda’s death and even tried to blame it on non-Iranian actors such as the CIA and Western journalists (see the section on contestations below for an elaboration); third, certain character traits and previous behavior were highlighted to portray Neda as innocent and as a victim of Islamic Iran (this involved emphasizing her relevance for women’s rights); fourth, these traits were supported by the circulation of the pre-death photographs mentioned earlier (showing a beautiful, young, smiling Neda) that provided a contrast to the visual dimension of the Iran interpretive package (male, old, somber, dark). In sum, the symbolic interaction between Neda and the Iran interpretive package gave Neda an ideological and visual accessibility that significantly facilitated global resonance and symbol formation. Of particular interest from an outcome perspective is that not all of these interpretations had firm factual grounding. To give just one example (see Olesen, forthcoming, b, for elaboration): In the reception of Neda in the global public sphere her life and death were often closely associated with the issue of women’s rights (a core theme in the Iran interpretive package) in Islam. The point here is obviously not to deny the relevance of this issue. Rather, what is notable is how Neda’s death and its
immediate context did not have a women’s rights dimension per se. The demonstrations where she died were, as already mentioned, motivated by the fraudulent presidential election in Iran on 12 June and, in a wider sense, by a general dissatisfaction with the regime in broad circles of the Iranian population. While certain observations pertaining to Neda’s life definitely warrant a women’s rights angle, the very direct link created after her death was clearly a projection anchored in the globally available Iran interpretive package.

Domain displacement

Injustice symbols are typically constructed on the basis of political activism. Yet from an outcome perspective it is of central relevance to identify to what extent injustice symbols become integrated in other domains or fields. Domain displacement can be observed in several ways. The most important, I argue, is the inclusion of an injustice symbol in formal politics, media, and popular culture. Following the Tunisian Revolution Mohamed Bouazizi has been posthumously recognized by governments, local authorities, international institutions, and media as a key person in not only the Tunisian Revolution, but the Arab Spring as a whole. In March 2011, for example, Bouazizi’s family met with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon who was in Tunisia for a meeting with transitional authorities (Egypt Independent 2011). In an act of formal recognition Bouazizi, along with four other key activists from the Arab Spring, was awarded the EU’s Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought October 2011 (European Parliament 2011). And at a more local level, Parisian politicians decided in 2011 to name a square after Bouazizi (Place Mohamed Bouazizi). Later that year The Independent placed Bouazizi on a list of ten people who changed the world (The Independent 2011), while The Times named him person of the year (The Times 2011) (since these recognitions have come from political authorities and media outside of Tunisia they are also key examples of spatial displacement). In September 2011, Khaled Said posthumously received the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Human Rights Award in Germany. In relation to the event German graffiti artist Andreas von Chrzanowski (aka Case) painted a portrait of Khaled Said on a piece of the Berlin Wall. The process and result is documented in a widely distributed video featuring one of the songs Khaled Said wrote before his death. The painting was to be placed permanently in Berlin’s Freedom Park. The Berlin portrait is interesting not
only because the portrait and video has been widely circulated, but also because it contains a
double symbolism. The use of a piece of the Berlin Wall as a “canvas” for Said’s portrait
powerfully projects his fate into global history and memory as the Berlin Wall contains
considerable symbolic importance for people all over the world. The symbolic association with
the Berlin Wall “lends” some of the wall’s undisputed and globally recognized status as an
injustice symbol to that of Khaled Said. Neda in particular has become the center of a small
industry of political art and merchandise. In 2012 the short film I am Neda was released and
before that her face inspired a number of sculptures by American artist Paula Slater (Naghibi
2011; Stage 2011). While the examples mentioned here are cultural productions created by
professional and semi-professional artists and producers, the popular culture element has a
significant amateur dimension, which, as noted above, is especially visible on YouTube. Here
one encounters numerous videos commemorating Said, Bouazizi, and Neda.

Contestations
The discussion of displacement above underlines a crucial point made earlier: even if we can
think of injustice symbols as outcomes, they are never fixed in any form or meaning. Symbols
only exist insofar as human actors inscribe meaning on them. This is an ongoing process that
may involve adding new layers of meaning (as is the case, for example, in spatial
displacement; see above), but also meaning contestation. Meaning contestation can take
various forms and have different agendas. In one main pattern actors seek to challenge the
empirical basis for the formation of the injustice symbol. In another main pattern (which may
combine with the first) challenges are directed towards the moral status and stature of the
symbol (see Benford and Hunt 2002 for a related discussion of frames and counter-frames).

Empirical inversion
Injustice symbols include identifiable victims and perpetrators and relatively clear-cut causal
chains linking the two. Perpetrators (in most cases at least) will attempt to resist symbolization
and thus actively engage in de-symbolization. This was the route taken by the Iranian regime
in the aftermath of the death of Neda Agha Soltan. As suggested above de-symbolization can
involve different strategies. In the case of Neda the de-symbolization attempts of the Iranian
regime focused mainly on the empirical foundation of the symbol. Paradoxically, however, in doing so the Iranian regime itself contributed strongly to the formation of the Neda injustice symbol. Paradoxically, because it could have played the “bad apple” card and claimed the shooting to have be an accident. Had the regime employed a combination of taking general responsibility for the event and individualizing the immediate cause of her death (i.e. identifying and penalizing the shooter), it could potentially have taken at least some of the political air out of the emotionally and morally charged attempts to link Neda’s death with struggles for freedom and democracy in Iran. Only few days after Neda’s death, in a 26 June Friday sermon, leading Iranian cleric Ayatollah Ahmed Khatami accused the protesters of staging Neda’s death: “The proof and evidence shows that they have done it themselves and have raised propaganda against the system” (quoted in Gorman 2009). And on 25 June the Iranian Ambassador to Mexico, Mohammad Hassan Ghadiri, in an interview with Wolf Blitzer of the CNN, pointed to possible CIA involvement: “If the CIA wants to kill some people and attribute that to the elements of the government, and then choosing a girl, would be something good for them because it would have much higher impact” (quoted in Malcolm 2009). Later, in a CNN interview with Larry King on 25 September, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took denial to the highest political level, suggesting that the incident had been fabricated to cast a negative global light on the regime (CNN 2009). And in January 2010, Iranian state television broadcast a documentary claiming that “forensic evidence and statements by security officials show Neda was not killed in the way shown by Western media. Neda was in fact killed after playing the role in a plot whose fake pictures were shown over and over again” (quoted in Mackey 2010). These blatant attempts at deflecting accusations, disregarding facts, and displacing guilt only served to strengthen the formation of the Neda global injustice symbol. The paradoxical effect was that by trying to avoid blame the regime seemed to only confirm and even widen the moral distance between itself and Neda. This is a reverse proportional dynamic in which the victim’s innocence and purity increases as the direct or indirect perpetrator’s moral position decreases (see Olesen 2013a for a related point in the context of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011). The moral-political corruption of the Iranian regime was further strengthened as it appeared how Neda’s family, in a clear attempt
to avoid symbolization, had been pressured by authorities not to mourn her publicly and denied a traditional funeral service (HBO 2010; Naghibi 2011: 65).

Moral stature challenges
As shown above, Mohamed Bouazizi has received a wide range of formal recognitions from governments, institutions, and media at a global level. But while the Bouazizi injustice symbol thus appears to be rather well-established it is not fixed. In the case of Bouazizi such negotiations have challenged his status in two ways. First, a main reason for Bouazizi's self-immolation was supposed to have been the humiliating slap in the face by a female municipal inspection officer, Faida Hamdi. Hamdi was subsequently jailed, yet acquitted some four months later. Hamdi has later emerged to not only deny the infamous slap, but to also portray Bouazizi as the main aggressor in the altercation (France 2 2012; Totten 2012). No one has been able to verify any of these diverging accounts. Yet, nevertheless, the result seems to have been a partial role reversal as Hamdi has also explained how she was jailed by the Ben Ali regime as a scapegoat and to deflect anger away from the regime. Recalling the arguments made in the conceptual/theoretical sections that injustice symbols build on victim innocence claims such as these pose a direct challenge to the moral status of the Bouazizi injustice symbol. While the Bouazizi injustice symbol is by now so firmly established that details of this nature are unlikely to seriously challenge it they may dampen its resonance and prospects for further institutionalization and establishment. Second, there are signs, especially at the local level of Sidi Bouzid, that Bouazizi's status as injustice symbol is not as uncomplicated as it seemed only two years ago. In Sidi Bouzid rumors have been spreading that Bouazizi's mother, Manoubia, has received money from international institutions and media and thus capitalized on Bouazizi's death. Apparently driven from the city by increasing hostility, the family now lives in the city of La Marsa near the capital of Tunis, adding further fuel to rumors (Abouzeid 2011; Sengupta 2011). While Faida Hamdi's intervention involves a direct attack on Bouazizi's moral character and innocence, the criticism of his mother and family is an indirect attack. While individual injustice symbols presuppose moral purity on part of the background person, this moral purity can be posthumously tarnished by the actions of those considered to be its custodians. Whether these rumors contain some truth or are
expressions of jealously is unclear and perhaps not important. What matters is that they are out there and apparently taking root in the negotiations over Bouazizi’s legacy.

CONCLUSION

The paper has argued for the fruitfulness of studying political symbols from an outcome perspective. Within the political sociology of social movements *injustice* symbols are of particular interest. Injustice symbols are based on events, situations, and actions considered unjust and representative of deep-rooted social and political problems. Injustice symbols are created through political action and with activists among the primary promoters. There are several types of injustice symbols. The paper has focused attention on a certain subset of this category: *individual* injustice symbols. Individual injustice symbols are formed on the basis of violence committed against individuals who are deemed to be innocent and undeserving of violence. Such events were labeled *violent person-events*. Individual injustice symbols are not a historically new phenomenon, but the spread of photo documentation devices and the formation of vast global communicative networks facilitate the circulation and resonance of violent person-events and, hence, the formation of individual injustice symbols. In recent years a number of such symbols have been created. The paper has discussed three cases in particular: Neda Agha Soltan, Iran 2009; Khaled Said, Egypt 2010, and Mohamed Bouazizi, Tunisia, 2010. Other recent examples would include Malala Yousafzai, shot and severely injured by the Taliban because of her advocacy for girls’ right to education in Pakistan in 2012 and Joyti Singh, who died after being raped by several men on a Delhi bus in 2012. In all of these cases the death and/or violence committed against these individuals sparked political protest on the local and national level, but also in many cases, on the global level.

The study of individual injustice symbols can be approached from a variety of angles. The ambition in the present paper has been to view them as outcomes of political activism. The guiding argument in that regard is as follows: while individual injustice symbols are formed through political activism they often subsequently acquire a social and political presence and stability that makes it relevant to view them from an outcome perspective. In a more political sociological formulation, we may say that they become part of the collective memory and
imaginary of a collective (this collective may be locally, nationally as well as globally rooted and oriented). The paper offered three analytical lenses for addressing this observation. First, it was argued that it is pertinent to study the visual carriers of individual injustice symbols. Often individual injustice symbols are created on the basis of visual documentation. This documentation in itself becomes a central part of the individual injustice symbol to the extent that the event is primarily remembered through its visual aspects. These kinds of photographs in other words become part of our shared political culture. Second, it was contended that injustice symbols can be viewed as outcomes through their use across space, time, and domains. Such displacement indicates how the symbol has been integrated in political culture and come to serve as ideational resource that can be utilized beyond its original empirical setting and the immediate political purposes that generated it. Third, while it may make sense to speak about injustice symbols as outcomes it is important that we do not consider such outcomes to be fixed. Since injustice symbols are created in and through political conflict they are invariably open and contested and involved in constant negotiation over their meaning.

REFERENCES


