

BOOK REVIEW

Twitter and Tear Gas

Tufekci, Z. (2019). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. New Haven: Yale University Press. ISBN: 978-0300215120. 360 pp. Listed price: \$19.06

Review by Nahla Bendefaa, Kent State University

T*witter and Tear Gas: the Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* is Zeynep Tufekci's attempt at discussing social movements in the ever-evolving digital era. Tufekci has a background in communication and computer science, as well as a particular drive for researching protests and social action. Tufekci weaves her way through numerous movements of the 21st century with ease as she paints a picture of how the interplay between social networks and social protests unfolds. By covering different cases, from the 2011 Tahrir Square protests in Cairo to the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, and not forgetting the Occupy movement, Tufekci delves into what distinguishes a social movement now from the likes of the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century in the U.S.

Tufekci employs a range of qualitative and quantitative methods in this volume. Tufekci primarily conducts interviews with activists and journalists in Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, Tunisia, and Lebanon. Tufekci also brings in decades of experience in observing social movements and the ways in which they interact with digital technologies and cultures. Additionally, Tufekci's experience as a computer programmer allows her to explore multiple databases and "big data" sets as an additional dimension of observation. Moreover, Tufekci acknowledges her positionality as a participant-observer, as well as the strengths and limitations that could arise from her experience with a "multi-cultural, multi-continent immigrant life-trajectory," considering that she is Turkish and has lived in Europe and the United States over the past decade. Furthermore, Tufekci's background

as both a researcher and an activist allows her to cater to a wide audience ranging from academics to organizers and activists alike. This is done particularly well by offering the readers a volume that is filled with personal narrative as well as thorough explanations of theoretical concepts such as the capacities and signals theory of social movements addressed in the third section of the book.

Tufekci refers to “networked” movements as those with “the reconfiguration of publics and movements through assimilation of digital technologies into their fabric.” This reconfiguration has allowed for a new take on what a movement is. Tufekci states that “in the networked era, a large, organized march or protest should not be seen as the chief outcome of previous capacity-building by a movement; rather, it should be looked at as the initial moment of the movement’s bursting onto the scene, but only the first stage in a potentially long journey.” Tufekci makes a claim that with the new information era, organizing has taken a new form. However, this brings questions about the effectiveness of such movements. Tufekci suggests that our benchmarks for a movement’s effectiveness should rely on newer standards. This is where the concepts of signals and capacities come into play.

Tufekci identifies a few other limitations of networked movements, particularly the overreliance on digital tools for organizing, which results in leaderless movements. Nevertheless, this lack of leadership is more nuanced than simply a better or worse alternative to what social movements looked like before. If anything, this presents yet another way in which movements are far from being smooth processes or allowing equal participation between activists. In fact, Tufekci posits that the desire to have leaderless movements has always existed, at least since the 1960s (p.52). The technological tools that now exist make it easier to fulfill that need.

Tufekci’s take on the use of internet and digital tools in social movements also touches on the repercussions this use has for the state. With the evolution of social media and technology and their use at the activist level, authoritarian regimes also use the internet as yet another repressive tool. Tufekci states

Whereas a social movement has to persuade people to act, a government or a powerful group defending the status quo only has to create enough confusion to paralyze people into inaction. The internet’s relatively chaotic nature, with too

much information and weak gatekeepers, can asymmetrically empower governments by allowing them to develop new forms of censorship based not on blocking information, but on making available information unusable.

Additionally, surveillance issues are touched upon briefly in this volume. In a way, this reinforces the fact that digital tools are not only empowering for activists, but also emboldening for states. This is not new in the study of the use of social media and social movements. Numerous studies of dissent in public spaces, including digital ones, support Tufekci's claim (Meek, 2012; Wojcieszak & Smith, 2014; Zaid, 2016).

Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest offers an interesting take on how social movements have evolved with technological advancements over the past few decades. I recommend this book to anyone interested in a holistic view of social movements in the 21st century and the nuanced ways in which they can be effective. While the networked protests have not introduced new takes on social mechanisms, they have altered the conditions under which we function as humans.

References

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