On barricades

Ilija Tomanić Trivundža

Abstract

Social movement literature has for a long time criticised a tendency of the mainstream media to reduce the complexity of protest events and negatively cover the activities of social movements which challenge the established socio-political order. According to the protest paradigm, as this tendency is referred to, the media will tend to focus on protest action, conflict and violence and through this obscure the issues being raised. The protest paradigm is generally supported by a limited set of visual motifs, mostly negative images of masked, violent protestors, of the destruction of property etc. or the reduction of protest to carnival. But there is an alternative to the protest paradigm. The uprising paradigm – as I propose to call it – is not merely an inversion of the protest paradigm, although it to a large extent relies on inversion of its conventions and motifs. What distinguishes it from the protest paradigm is that protestors are not presented as threatening masses but as "the masses" transforming themselves into "the people". In this sense, the uprising paradigm, especially as it was used in the mainstream media since the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, is linked to the ideological project of defining democracy as a variation of western-style liberal democracy and serves to reinforce media's role in facilitating democratic civic life. Like the protest paradigm, the uprising paradigm is visually supported by a limited set of photographic motifs and this chapter analyses the symbolic meaning of one of its most potent images – that of (the citizens on) the barricades.

Keywords: masses, crowd, public opinion, press photography, protests

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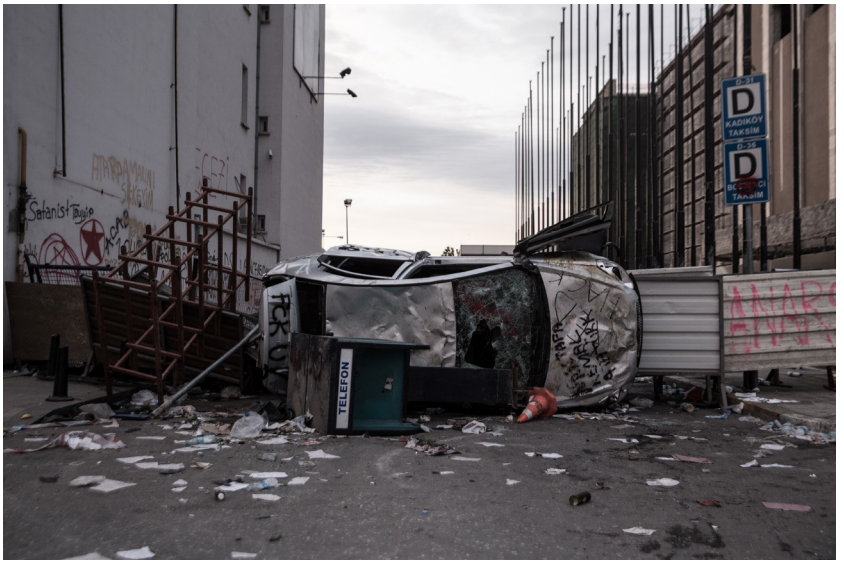
1 Introduction

It is a rather haunting image. A young boy is squatting behind a robust wooden palette, supporting it in the upright position with his left hand. In his right hand, he holds a stone waiting to be thrown. In the photograph, however, he is frozen in a moment when he is looking at us across his shoulder. From the narrow opening between a white dust mask that is covering his mouth and nose, and black plastic Guy Fawkes mask covering the top of his head, his eyes are piercingly looking at us. It is a clear demand to return the gaze, to stay squatted behind the improvised wooden shield that blocks out most of the scene captured in the frame of the photograph. The framing and composition of the photograph draw us inwards, into the frame – all that we need to know about the event, the raging street confrontation between the protesters and Turkish riot police in Taksim Square on 1 June 2013, is contained in the frame. To me, the haunting effect of the image does not come from looking at the fragile young body hiding amidst an improvised urban battle, or from the smoke-covered, sinisterly dark sky. It comes from the discrepancy between the accumulated frustration of the young protester and the miniscule "firepower" of the small stone that nestled in the palm of his hand. To me, the punctum of this image, as Roland Barthes (1981) would term it, is the smallness of the stone, and the realization of the miniscule "punctum" it can cause if thrown. With the benefit of hindsight regarding the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests, it is almost inevitable to read this image as one that symbolizes the powerlessness of an individual against the State and its ideological and repressive apparatuses. The photograph is also, one must admit, a somewhat (all too) familiar image.

The second image comes puts the viewer into a state of rapture. A ripped-out telephone booth and a smashed silver sedan form a provisional barricade along with scaffolding, construction pipes and metal plates. Apart from the barricade, the alley is completely deserted, abandoned, and you can almost hear the eerie silence of the scene. The silence is, as a Slovene saying goes, so thick that you could cut it with a knife. Again, the image has a haunting effect, but for completely different reasons. We are left standing in front of a familiar and potent political symbol, a barricade. But it is a deserted symbol. There are no protestors to claim it. There are no policemen to contest it. Is an abandoned symbol still a symbol? Or does it, if left unclaimed, becomes a mere structure, a physical object, a masterpiece of makeshift architecture (or a pile of rubble), a quintessentially postmodern "object"? The photographs are printed on palm-sized stickers and as I go through the small batch that I was given, photographer Barbaros Kayan notes that he already got into trouble for posting them around Istanbul. No wonder, we laugh, his name and website are printed on the side of the stickers. The images come from his series on the 2013 Gezi Park

protests that was exhibited as part of the 2014 Helsinki Photography Biannual.[1] I compliment him on the image of the barricade, to which he replied: "Oh, but I have a whole series on them."



Picture 1: Istanbul 2013, (c) Barbaros Kayan, courtesy of the author

Picture 2: Istanbul 2013, (c) Barbaros Kayan, courtesy of the author

1 In 2014, Kayan also received the 2014 Guardian Witness Award for this series.

2 Return of the masses in the era of thinned hegemony

Amidst the lamenting talk about the declining political participation and growing apathy of citizens that marked the turn of the new millennium, there is increasing evidence of the return of a repressed political subject – the masses — who had been relegated to the political backstage at the turn of 1980s in Western Europe and a decade later in former Eastern Europe. Let there be no mistake – this should not be taken as a grandiose claim that we now live in the age of masses, such as Hardt and Negri's (2004) hyperbolic proclamation of the age of *multitude*. The return of the masses onto the political stage is of course neither universal nor triumphant – it is at best sporadic, limited to short-lived localized episodes of collective action, which might or might not lead to social and political change. This return of the masses is also highly unpredictable, often triggered by marginal events or the actions of political elites, such as the suicide of a street vendor (Tunisia), a rise in public transport fares (Brazil), or of the installing of speeding cameras by a local mayor (Slovenia). Of course, not all of the popular uprisings and mass protests we have witnessed over the past decade and a half have been triggered by such unexpected events, but these unpredicted "snaps" indicate how contested the political sphere actually is under the seemingly dormant surface of clicktivism and declining voting turnout, and how quickly seemingly unpolitical issues can become radically political. It also indicates how thin the current hegemony of the dominant order actually is and to what extent its security depends not on ideological but on the repressive state apparatuses, and their continuous policing of citizens. This thinned hegemony of (socially and environmentally) the unsustainable global neoliberal economic order, upheld by increasingly refeudalized political elites, is not so much sustained by the ideological "vailing" of reality but rather, it is the outcome – to a large extent linked to new communication technologies – of what John Tagg (2016) describes as a "society of open secret", a society where citizens know that the system is unjust or that politicians are corrupt, and in which power-holders know that the citizens know. Under conditions of open secret, the absence of popular rebellion seems to be increasingly dependent not on any party-aligned ideology but on the system's ability to sustain a sufficient level of personal wellbeing and (perceived) personal freedom.

It would also be an overstatement to claim that we live in the era of popular uprisings, but one can certainly argue that we live in an era in which imagining solving political issues through a popular uprising – even if only at the level of unattainable political fantasy (see e.g. Carpentier, 2014) – has become more prominent and popular, as recent examples following the initial success of the so-called *Arab Spring*, the *Facebook protests* in Croatia in spring 2011 or the *People's uprisings* in winter 2012-2013 in Slovenia, or the May-August 2013 Gezi Park protest movement in Turkey, the Brazilian April-July 2013 *Re-*

volta do Vinagre, the winter 2013-2014 *Euromaidan* in Ukraine and the Hong Kong *Umbrella Revolution* of late 2014,[2] to name just a few, seem to indicate. Regardless of the different triggers and resolutions of these popular uprisings, they do indicate[3] that politically active "masses" have again become important political imaginary, that the summoning of "the masses" who transform into "the people" is again an important political image.

2 In Croatia, the so-called Facebook protests started in February 2011 as a reaction against government corruption scandals and deteriorating economic and social situation in the country. The protests organised through social media, which brought together very diverse social groups, lost support after a few months without achieving the common goal – resignation of Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor. All Slovenian People's Uprisings in Slovenia started as protests against the mayor of Slovenia's second largest city in November 2012, but were soon transformed into nation-wide (and Facebook-coordinated) demonstrations against political corruption and the austerity policies of the government of Prime Minister Janez Janša. The protests ended in March 2013 after a vote of no confidence for Janša's cabinet and the forming of a new coalition government. In Turkey, the Gezi Park protests, which started in May 2013 were initially aimed at an urban redevelopment plan in Istanbul, but gradually grew into nation-wide protests against the authoritarian policies of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The protesters rallied against the encroachment of the country's secularism and political freedoms, such as freedom of expression and freedom of the press. As in the aforementioned cases, the protest movement had no centralized organisation and brought together very diverse social and political groups. The protests, which gradually ceased in August 2013, were on several occasions brutally supressed by police (11 deaths, 8000 injuries, over 3000 arrests). In Brazil, the demonstrations, which lasted between April and July 2013, were triggered by an increase in public transport prices but evolved into protests against the inadequate social policies, political corruption and police brutality. As with previous cases, social media played an important role in the organisation of what became the largest nation-wide protests since 1992. Although the protests were on several occasions brutally cracked down on by the police (resulting in at least 10 deaths), the government did implement a series of acts and social reforms that addressed the claims of the protesters. Ukrainian Euromaidan protests were a series of demonstrations which began in November 2013 in Kiev in support of greater integration of the Ukraine with the European Union, and which evolved into protests against the administration and corruption of President Viktor Yanukovych, who fled the country in the aftermath of failed and bloody attempts to crack down the protests. The numbers of casualties are still disputed (over 100 protesters and 18 policemen) and the aftermath of the Euromaidan protests has been the prolonged political crisis and military confrontation (Russian annexation of Crimea, war with separatists in Donbas region). The Umbrella Revolution is a name for pro-democracy protests that took place in Hong Kong between September and December 2015. The protesters demand for universal suffrage were not met by the authorities and after 79 days of protests, the police cleared out the protest area (in total 955 people were arrested during the protests).

3 Important indicator of this shared horizon of expectations is the prominent "cross-referencing" between the protests. Journalists would often refer to new mass protests as "another Tahrir", or "inspired by the Arab Spring", or simply proclaim Et tu, Zagreb?, as The Economist did in relation to Croatian protests (http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2011/03/protests_croatia). Such cross-referencing can also be found on protest posters.

Picture 3: Kiev 2014, (c) Barbaros Kayan, courtesy of the author.

Picture 4: Kiev 2014, (c) Barbaros Kayan, courtesy of the author.

3 Poverty and a cornucopia of protest images

The choice of the word "image" in the last sentence is deliberate. Every political protest is not merely a communicative act in itself, but also a communicative act aimed at being mediated. In any protest or uprising, large segments of population will not physically participate in the demonstration, and for them, the protests will exist *in* and *through* mediated communication. This is not only to say that communication about the protests in mainstream media and/or on social networks is constitutive for the building of societal awareness about the protests, or as Bart Cammaerts (2012, p. 119) put it "to mobilize political support, to increase legitimation and validation of their demands and to enable them [the protesters] to widen the scope of conflict beyond the likeminded." Communication about the protests is constitutive for participating protestors as well – if protests are large in scale or geographically dispersed, they too will rely on a mediated "picture" of events to make sense of the whole. And as we have witnessed in the past years, communication technologies through which the protests are reported are, to a large extent, also communication technologies that facilitate the very organisation of the protests themselves.

What I would like to argue is that in this process and in an increasingly convergent communication environment, visual imagery such as video and photography play an important, though often overlooked role. Photography in particular has been instrumental in these struggles, although its prominence – particularly in the mainstream media – is not due to its role of supplying visual "evidence", or due to the detailed descriptive power the photographic image possesses. On the contrary, their significance for collective struggle is in their power of symbolic depiction and articulation of popular sentiment through visual symbolism. As Michael Griffin claims, photographs can serve as "ideological memes, transcending the depiction of specific events, times and places to symbolize abstract, mythic concepts such as nationhood, heroism, collective struggle, or selfless sacrifice." (Griffin, 2012, p. 164) If one looks at the images of political protests in the mainstream media, the argument in favour of their symbolic value is clear. The repertoire of images that are used with news stories is rather limited and generally includes depiction of symbolic acts, such as the handing of flowers to the police, masked protestors with clutched fists, protest paraphernalia, and conflict between protesters and the police. But such symbolic condensations are of course not the domain of images alone. Social movement literature has for a long time criticized a tendency of the mainstream media to reduce the complexity of protest events and negatively cover the activities of social movements which challenge the established socio-political order. According to the *protest paradigm,* as this tendency is referred to, the media will tend to focus on protest action, conflict and violence and through this obscure the issues being raised. The reports will simultaneously

be contributing to the marginalization of the movement by presenting the actors involved as socially deviant or normatively different from the non-protesting audience (Chan/Lee, 1984; McLeod/Hertog, 2001). The protest paradigm is generally supported by a limited set of visual motifs, mostly negative images of masked, violent protestors, of the destruction of property etc. or the reduction of protest to carnival. But there is an alternative to the protest paradigm, which could, for the sake of analogy, be called the *uprising paradigm*. The uprising paradigm is not merely an inversion of the protest paradigm, although to a large extent it relies on inversion of its conventions and motifs. What distinguishes it from the protest paradigm is that protestors are not presented as threatening masses but as "the masses" transforming themselves into "the people". In this sense, the uprising paradigm, especially as it has been used in the mainstream media since the Tunisian Revolution, is linked to the ideological project of defining democracy as a variation of western-style liberal democracy and serves to reinforce the media's role in facilitating democratic civic life. Like the protest paradigm, the uprising paradigm is visually supported by a limited set of photographic motifs, such as the ones in Figure 1 and images that show how protestors come from all walks of life. Within this repertoire of visual images of resistance, one of the most potent images for signalling that the legitimacy of the existing socio-political order is being questioned is undoubtedly the image of citizens on the barricades.

4 Acropolis of the good, the bad, and the ragged

The image of citizens on the barricades is of course not a contemporary visual icon of resistance – it is part of the political and visual heritage of the "long nineteenth century", as the period between the French Revolution and the First World War was called by Eric Hobsbawm. But this historical pedigree does not in itself explain the symbolic capital and mobilizing potential of this image for contemporary political struggles. Its mobilization potential does not stem from the fact that we have already seen it, in history textbooks under chapters on the 1848 Spring of Nations, or in one of countless reproductions of Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple*, or between the lines of Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserables*. Its mobilising potential – and by extension its value for contemporary mainstream media – lies in the fact that it visually articulates the fiction of unity of the people, of citizens, that the image captures the (unattainable) fiction that a unified political body and that its potential for political participation and collective action to bring about a more just, democratic world exists.

Mark Traugott (2010, p. 223) points out that the moment of construction of the insurgent barricade marks a moment when the underprivileged section of citizens came to realize that the socio-political conflict is so great that it

can only be resolved through direct collective action. According to Traugott, traditionally the primary functions of the barricade were to demarcate territory, protect the protestors, enhance the sense of belonging to insurgent group and mobilize support from bystanders (ibid.). Since in most instances, contemporary insurgent barricades no longer provide the level of security or enduring protection of protestors as they did on the cobbled streets of 19th century revolutionary Paris – their endurance against planned attacks by modern police or military machineries is in most cases merely temporary[4]. The fact that they are still being erected is indicative of their primarily symbolic role. In the face of their limited protective role, the importance of barricades lies in the fact that they represent a spontaneous and visible rejection of the monopoly of the State over territorial control and excretion of violence on that territory. Traugott (2010, p. 222) claims that "the transformation of the barricade from a utilitarian instrument into a 'collective memory' may even have enhanced its ability to mobilize individuals and given it the power to galvanize otherwise inchoate groups into concerted action."

Unlike demonstrations, barricades are not a routine element of political struggles and the symbolic power of the barricade stems precisely from this rarity. Put differently, they are not routinely erected at demonstrations and therefore signal a particular turning point, a point when "the masses" sense the potential to become "the people". Barricades also act as a kind of special signifier which connects the present with the past, linking current questioning of the legitimacy of the existing social, political and economic relations with the history of radical socio-political uprisings, or in other words, of (democratic) revolutions. Traugott's account of the contemporary symbolic function of the barricade is worth quoting at length:

> In time it [the barricade] would achieve iconic status, implying a still higher level of abstraction in which memories and associations had been so tightly compacted that the mere mention of the barricade or the display of its silhouette functioned as a surrogate for the revolutionary tradition as a whole. This recasting of the meaning of the barricade worked in the realm of political rhetoric and iconography a bit like a literary synecdoche, in which a part (the barricade) is taken to represent the whole (revolution). (Traugott, 2010, p. 223)

For Traugott, the image of the barricade becomes a nonverbal equivalent of revolutionary slogans, condensing "a complex reality into a readily comprehended and easily communicated story." (ibid.).

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4 Admittedly, some insurgent barricades still succeed in seriously limiting the advance of police and military, as, for example, in the Euromaidan protest in Kiev, but it has become much more likely today that successful temporary barriers are not erected by the protesters but by the repressive apparatuses of the state (e.g. Egyptian army barricading access points to Tahrir Square).

But the mobilizing capacity of the image of citizens at the barricades should not be reduced to its role of legitimizing (and historicising) the claims of protesters. Equally important is its role of granting the legitimacy to protestors as a social category. The idea of democracy as the rule of "the people" has traditionally been torn between the positive image of "the people" and a negative image of "the masses". The masses are not a static concept and have undergone a number of naming exercises. As Stefan Jonsson has shown, the idea of mass evolved from an initially neutral term that designated a "quantity" of citizens, to a term reserved for the poor and the destitute: "the masses". After the Spring of Nations, the term became associated with the organised labour movement and the proletariat, only to acquire yet another meaning – as a pathological element, as an "illness characterized by the regression of the rational faculties[5] to the effect that the primitive instincts were set loose." (Jonsson, 2008, p. 8) In an alternative narrative which can be found in the literature on public opinion, the distinction between these two social categories was theorized as the distinction between the *public* and the *crowd.* The public was characterized as rational (Bentham, 1994[1791]), educated and bourgeois (Mackinnon, 1828), connected by common interest in the exercise of public reasoning through the mediating channels of the press (Tarde, 1969[1898]), their connectedness being based on the kinship of ideas. They were a social category that, as Tönnies (1998[1922]) put it, never did or could meet in person. The crowd stood in sharp opposition to the public, its interconnectedness deemed as short-lived, immediate, based on physical contact and visibility (Tarde, 1969[1898]). The crowd was defined as irrational (Mackinnon, 1828), intolerant (Tocqueville, 1900[1840]), anonymous and susceptible to authority (Le Bon, 2002[1896]), even animalistic, as, for example, in Park's (2007[1924]) account of the crowd's changing mood, which he compares to the milling of a herd of cattle. But regardless of the differences between these definitions, the crowd was in all accounts a dangerous, destructive social category, whose uncontrolled outbursts could lead to a stampede. For Tarde (1969[1898]), one of the greatest dangers to democracy was for the spatially dispersed public to degrade itself to a physically present crowd, and the negative treatment of demonstrations within the media's protest paradigm seems to be a response to similar fears. Within the protest paradigm, images of citizens on the barricades are the prime signifiers of the much feared stampede, but within the context of the uprising paradigm, they are precisely the opposite – they hold the potential to signal the transformation of the irrational, intolerant and potentially destructive crowd, the masses, into a community, into demos, and thereby reinforce the political

5 The lack of rational reason or autonomous will is often emphasized by representatives of the endangered political elite. An illustrative example of this is the designation of protesters as "zombies" by the leading political party during the 2012-2013 People's Uprising in Slovenia. For more on this see Tomanić Trivundža (2015).

mythology of the ultimately triumphant power of the united people. *¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!* They also signal the essentially undemocratic nature of repression of such demands, a mythology mainstream media are so eager to promote because it also enables the constitution of the good ("the people"), the bad ("forces of evil", dictators etc.) and the ragged (the underprivileged other constitutive of the ethos of liberal citizenry).

5 The sublime power and a deserted signifier

From the perspective of photography and photographers, the allure of the barricade goes beyond its symbolism. Before it becomes an image, the barricade as a photographic motif is a physical object which is always improvised, a "violently" constructed structure made out of a fairly limited number of urban elements: paving stones, bricks, construction metal, boards, vehicles, fences, furniture, car tires and a variety of available "containers", such as, e.g., garbage cans.[6] It is an architectural construction, a sublime aesthetic object, which comes from the unusual, unexpected, surreal amassing of everyday objects. The objects that make up the barricade, the elements and signifiers of existing social order, are torn out of their original (physical and semantic) context and presented in a new arrangement, subjugated above all to the logic of physics and statics. The barricade is a kind of monument to the failed social order, whose still recognizable constituent elements are piled one atop another, but the logic of this "new order" is still undecipherable – and this is what Jonsson (2008) claims, is the origin of the sublime effect of the barricade. Analyzing Victor Hugo's description of the Saint-Antoine barricade in *Les Miserables,* he contends:

> Refusing to enter language, evading the grip of rational concepts, the barricade, like all things sublime, allows only for a contemplative viewing, as it instills in the spectator a sense of fear and admiration related to religious experience. (Jonsson, 2008, p. 50)

It is no surprise that Hugo called it the "Acropolis of the destitute". However, when one looks at media accounts of the popular uprisings since the Tunis Revolution, the images of barricades have been curiously absent or margialized. Even in images published by the protesters, the barricades are most often reduced to but one element of mise-en-scène, to visual background noise. They have not become the iconic representations of the democracy in the making. Is this because of their rhetoric of the sublime? Or is it because the "violent" reconstruction of everyday objects that make up the barricade is too close to the

6 The etymology of the barricades is in fact linked to such "containers" that were a necessary component of early barricades. It is derived from the French word barrique, which indicates a particular type of a barrel.

Picture 5: Midyat 2016, (c) Barbaros Kayan, courtesy of the author.

Picture 6: Midyat 2016, (c) Barbaros Kayan, courtesy of the author.

Description of the project: Barricades is a ongoing project by Turkish photographer Barbaros Kayan that simply aims to form topological relations between the barricades that were formed due to political and economical situations and the materials that were used in forming them. Barbaros Kayan was born in Turkey in 1982. He is a graduate in Visual Communication Design with honors in Istanbul (2010). Kayan is a documentary photographer and a multimedia artist. He focuses on social events, state politics, being in motion and streets in his works. He uses reality as a means. http://www.barbaroskayan.com

concept of the crowd, the unruly masses, the mob, rather than to "the people"? Put differently, is the mental horizon of the uprising paradigm also demarcated by the ultimate fear of a revolution?

Contemporary media accounts of popular uprisings through the uprising paradigm seem to be based on a premise of non-violent collective action, which includes renouncement of damage to (private and public) property. Like the protest paradigm, the uprising paradigm is essentially a liberal concept. While it does acknowledge that within the increasingly asymmetrical power relations that characterize contemporary society, the (rational) public occasionally needs – and should be allowed to – transform itself into a physically present mass of citizens (i.e. that merely voicing public opinion no longer has the sufficient efficacy to influence the decreasingly accountable political elites), it also supports the view that the democratization of the social, political and economic order should only be obtained by non-violent political action. The people are allowed to become martyrs, but not to rebel. The uprising paradigm thus delegitimizes anger and frustration within the existing order as motives for legitimate political action, or rather, insists that anger and frustration cannot have their origin in the rational reasoning of individuals and publics. If barricades are indeed erected, as Traugott argues, in the moment when it seems that the democratization of existing social, political and economic relations requires a *radical* break, then the failure to place the barricades in the foreground in mainstream media coverage of the popular protests should not come as a surprise.

Looking at Barbaros Kayan's series of photographs of the barricades undoubtedly evokes the uneasy feeling of admiration and fear of the sublime that Jonsson so aptly describes. But there is another dimension of sublimeness that strikes me when looking at them, and it is precisely this dimension that to me makes them emblematic images of contemporary political struggle. Kayan presents them as deserted physical objects. In his photographs, the barricades become these giant, deserted (and sublime) signifiers, waiting to be claimed, silently reminding us that the political struggle entails not only struggle *with* the symbols but also struggle *for* the symbols.

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Biography

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