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Why food is such a powerful symbol in political protest

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Food is a hot issue in today's activism. Last year, UK climate group Just Stop Oil hurled tomato soup at Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* at the National Gallery in London. Later they smeared cake on a Madame Tussauds waxwork of King Charles. Protesters affiliated with the German group *Letzte Generation* (Last Generation) threw mashed potatoes on Claude Monet's *Grainstacks* at the Barberini Museum in Potsdam, Germany. An activist targeted Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* with cake at the Louvre Museum in Paris. All were intended as wake-up calls about the anthropogenic climate catastrophe.

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Maybe this is just nuts to me 🤪 but an man dressed as an old lady jumps out of a wheel chair and attempted to smash the bullet proof glass of the Mona Lisa. Then proceeds to smear cake on the glass, and throws roses everywhere all before being tackled by security. 😂???

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Food has a long history of being a weapon of protest. Historian E.P. Thompson proposed in 1971 that food was part of the “moral economy” of protest in pre-industrial England. Food riots in the 18th century (such as those that took place across England in 1766 over the rising price of wheat and other cereals) were partly a response to the breakdown of the old moral economy of provision, replaced by the new political economy of the free market.

Food has been mobilised many times since as an expression of a sense of injustice. In 2007 and 2008, rallies unfolded in more than 25 countries against the social and economic consequences of dramatically increased food prices.

Food also becomes part of feminist expression, as was the case in 1863 bread riots in Richmond, Virginia led largely by hungry mothers, chanting “bread or blood!”.

It is even tied up with national identity. In the 2007 tortilla protests in Mexico protestors came up with the slogan “*sin maíz, no hay país*” (without corn, there is no country).



Protesters in Mexico wave a tortilla. EPA

Just Stop Oil said its own use of soup draws attention to the cost of living crisis. Soup is a common feature at food banks, which are multiplying across the country.

The group’s refrain that people are being forced to choose between heating and eating is a reminder that some can’t even afford to heat that soup. The food used in the protest, therefore, becomes a multilayered symbol – of the climate crisis and the associated cost of living crisis.

Food is inclusion

In his seminal 1981 article on gastro-politics, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argued that food can either serve the symbolic function of indicating equality, intimacy or solidarity or serve to sustain relations characterised by hierarchy, distance or segmentation. For example, seeds have been long associated with solidarity among peasants but at the same time can become an instrument of control when in the hands of global seed multinationals, which can end up with the power to decide who has access to them.

The food thrown at famous works of art by climate activists can, in a way, be seen as a medium of inclusion. It can be interpreted as an act of sharing – and sharing food is one of the most basic ways that shared community and identity is created. Even though the food is not “shared” in a traditional sense, it nevertheless serves as a medium for consolidating the activists’ identities, through which they communicate their message to others in the hope of mobilising a strong collective response.

It has also been documented that the creation of new social movements draws on food as part of the process of creating new identities and possibilities for action. This inclusion can take place on the level of other activist groups as part of what sociologist Herbert H. Haines labels “radical flank effects”.

This is when the radical faction of a social movement can increase both support for and identification with more moderate groups in the same movement. In other words, more moderate climate activist groups may be getting more support and exposure thanks to the radical food-involving actions of the groups such as Just Stop Oil and Letzte Generation.

Food is exclusion

But food can also be a medium of exclusion. As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has convincingly shown, food can define the inside and outside of group boundaries. He distinguishes between “the taste of necessity” associated with the most filling and most economical foods for the lower classes, and “the taste of liberty or luxury” for the upper classes, who have the freedom to concern themselves not only with being full but with presentation and experience of eating.

Food can become a symbol of what separates the powerful from the powerless, or certain groups from the rest of society. In the context of climate activism, using food as one of the mediums of protest can further separate the activist groups from the rest of the society (which is evident from the criticism of them).

Those observing the protest can feel disgusted by the tactics – either as an act of vandalism relating to the art or to the food itself – particularly in a culture that opposes food waste.



A protestor holds up an empty soup can in front of Van Gogh's sunflowers, which is covered in tomato soup.

Protestors at the National Gallery. Alamy/Zuma

Anthropologist David Sutton also suggests that food can serve as a tool to challenge the so-called market “rationality” and other assumptions of contemporary neoliberalism. According to him “the language of food is a language that contextualises, that situates, that moralises, that challenges the supposedly neutral, non-cultural language of neoliberal economics”.

For climate activism today this is a crucial point: the link between a capitalist drive for growth and climate change is well established. Using food in protests can therefore be a symbol of a failure on the part of governments to re-structure our political economic systems to guarantee planetary sustainability.

The sharp contrast between the convivial eating of food and using it as a tool of condemnation of government inaction – as an expression of rage and frustration – reflects the sharp contrast between the protestors’ vision for the future of the planet and the government’s political economic vision.

Food has long been a rich, diverse, and complex medium for protest and as the climate crisis collides with the cost of living crisis, it appears to be more potent than ever.