Rehearsing for the revolution

The No Kings protests made their politics real to everyone who watched—including the state.

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A No Kings protest in New York City in June (Photo: RoySmith / Wikimedia Commons)

On the day of Trump's military parade in DC, I huddled among comrades and friends at Daley Plaza, Chicago, while thousands gathered for the No Kings protest. A flock of birds descended while rage bubbled to the crowd's surface. I imagined those birds as God's holy signature, a blessing over the river of protestors. Kendrick Lamar's "Not Like Us" billowed through the crowd as anti-Trump signs bobbed to the rhythms

of collective movement. I marched among an estimated 75,000 people.

It was inevitable that the Trump administration's policies would inspire gatherings such as we saw in Chicago, Pittsburgh, Seattle, DC, San Francisco, and, of course, Los Angeles, where Trump once again exploited bloated executive powers to deploy the military. It was much more surprising, however, that suburban satellites became sites of mass mobilization too, including Joliet, Elmhurst, and Naperville, suburbs of Chicago not known for leftist, let alone progressive, political mobilization. Dissatisfaction with this administration's policies runs high. I carried the desire for change close to my heart as I marched toward Trump Tower in solidarity with friends and strangers.

I also recognize the limits of this kind of demonstration. As the English essayist, art critic, painter, and novelist John Berger argued, protests are more "rehearsal" for "revolutionary change" than change itself. Berger was an artist and a political radical who believed in organizing for a world with legitimate freedom for everybody. When he accepted the prestigious Booker Prize for his novel *G* in 1972, he spoke of the novelist as "one who is concerned with the intersection between individual and historical destiny….The historical destiny of our time is becoming clear. The oppressed are breaking through the wall of silence which was built into their minds by their oppressors."

He closed the speech by offering half of his winnings to the London-based Black Panthers.

In his essay "On the Nature of Mass Demonstrations," published four years earlier, Berger considers the possibilities and limits of mass demonstrations. They are symbolic, he says, in that they represent political possibility. Mass demonstrations like No Kings "demonstrate a force that is scarcely used." This rehearsal is precisely their strength. As a form of theater and play, as an act associated with the imagination, a protest's "value is the result of its artificiality, for therein lies its prophetic, rehearsing possibilities." One thinks of the shouts, the singing, the occupation of streets, the props and banners, or even the display of collective unity—a unity that is as much fiction as fact—and how they invoke the possibility of a different world that is temporarily in reach but dissipates when the protestors disband.

I felt this ephemerality in Chicago. My friends and I had to leave before the protest ended, and even as others gathered in our place, we all recognized that evening would bring an end to our rehearsal. Trump Tower continued to stand tall in Chicago despite our shouting, and most of us returned to work, school, and family. The vision for a different world seemed to vanish. Yet for Berger, the fleeting quality of mass protest is not a mark of failure but is rather essential to its function.

Even if mass protests are a rehearsal—even if they are, in a sense, a performance—the characters and setting, the pathos and counter-narrative, make their politics real to everyone who watches—including the state.

Berger writes:

> “Either authority must abdicate and allow the crowd to do as it wishes: in which case the symbolic suddenly becomes real, and, even if the crowd’s lack of organization and preparedness prevents it from consolidating its victory, the event demonstrates the weakness of authority.”

In short, mass mobilization seriously undermines the status quo. Perhaps this is why Trump called in the National Guard and Marines in California, despite objections from local government. The mobilized crowd with its dreams for a life beyond the authoritarian politics of the present represents a threat, and that threat is often met with violence by the regimes it challenges. This, argues Berger, questions the legitimacy of the ruling powers: “The historical role of demonstrations is to show the injustice, cruelty, irrationality, of the existing State authority. Demonstrations are protests of innocence.”

Still, even if “Demonstrations predict the realization of their own ambitions and thus may contribute to that realization,” he says, “… they cannot themselves achieve them.”

So what grounds the revelatory visions of mass mobilization in reality? The short answer: the community that doesn’t disband, whose whole life is lived in relationship to that other world once the protest is over. I have seen this in my own activist communities, as dreams for a better future become a praxis that stretches before and beyond the protest day.

The activists I know have organized mutual-aid funds, attended court hearings for the detained, and led political education workshops in coffee shops and community centers. They have taken pilgrimages to the imprisoned and organized on behalf of their families. They realize the “other world” only momentarily conjured as a hope by the protestor. The ritualized shouts and marches give way to regularity. The political rehearsal becomes real. The imagined, more just world becomes actual—in the classroom, the prison, the courtroom, the community center, the library, the living room, and the park. Yes, it is in its infancy, but if it’s tended to, slowly and carefully, it can grow, welcomed into existence by the everyday practices of people who don’t cease protesting after mass mobilization ends.

At its best, the church exists as that community too. It too lives in relationship to the future, with dreams for another world. “The kingdom of God is among you,” announced Jesus as he gathered the downtrodden and despairing into a community animated by God’s own promise for a future of liberation, freedom, and salvation. That future came in the form of food for communities in need, with the dozens of fish pulled from the sea, in the loaves that fed thousands, in the sharing of all things to those who were in need, and in the sacred meal at the center of Christian life and praxis. “Take and eat,” said Jesus to his disciples, even to the one who betrayed him.

The church has the potential to convert the rehearsal of mass mobilization into an actual practice, to not only dream of God’s future of justice, but to embody it. I think of the church’s role in the sanctuary movement, of those Christian communities that have encouraged unionization and broader support for workers, or of those Christians who continue to organize against genocide. These are all ways of bearing witness to God’s future well beyond the spectacle of momentary inspiration.