



The Spectacle of Protest: Power and Resistance in *Cosmopolis*

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Abstract

In this postmodern era, humans are evolving within systems that are deeply shaped by high-tech capitalism. Even marginalized communities are being drawn into this nest, where survival often depends on participation in the very structures that oppress them. In such a world, resistance must also evolve. It no longer looks same and now, even acts of silence, violence, or protest carry new meanings. This paper explores how people in the streets express resistance and how capitalist society chooses to view or dismiss them. In Cosmopolis, Don DeLillo presents various kinds of protest such as chaotic, fragmented, and symbolic but all of them are deeply interconnected. At their core, they demand the same thing, the right to live a peaceful life, free from the constant pressures and controls of capitalist power. These people don't want to be controlled. They want to be seen, heard, and allowed to exist on their own terms. In Cosmopolis the protagonist Eric Packer is a billionaire, yet he is also deeply vulnerable. However, to the public, the protestors, he represents the face of capitalism. Throughout the novel, different events unfold around him that reflects the resistance of ordinary people. This paper argues that the high-tech capitalist system deliberately refuses to recognize these protests as meaningful instead they are devalues them.

Keywords: protest, power, capitalism, spectacle, hyperreality.

Introduction

In this fast-paced era, it seems like everything is in order. But when we look more closely, we can see how much control is held by a small group of powerful people and systems. The ones who suffer the most are the ones who work the hardest, the working class and the marginalized communities. Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* shows this clearly through the character Eric Packer, a billionaire who travels

through a city full of protests and unrest. While he tries to stay in control, the world around him is slowly falling apart. The protests in the novel are not just random events; they represent real anger and resistance from people who are tired of being ignored. This paper focuses on the different forms of protest seen in *Cosmopolis*, their deeper meanings and how the capitalist system reacts to them.



Protest and Symbolism

In this post modern era, people are focused only on their personal routines and ambitions. There is no time or energy to engage with political issues even though it directly impacts their lives. Yet there are always few who are courageous enough to stand up and resist. In *Cosmopolis*, the story follows Eric Packer, a billionaire who moves through the city inside his limousine, disconnected from the outside world. As he travels, he witnesses different forms of activism and protest. At first, he believes that no protest can truly affect people in power. However, the final act of resistance he encounters forces him to question everything. It becomes a turning point not only in the story, but in his perception of control, power and meaning. The first protest Eric witnesses occurs while he is having lunch with his wife Elise, at a restaurant. Two men suddenly raise their hands, each holding a rat by the tail and begin shouting about 'the specter'. Eric is surprisingly calm, tells the bodyguard not to intervene. In this moment, the rat becomes more than a grotesque object, it transforms into a symbol of resistance. Traditionally, associated with filth and the underground and the rat here may represent the forgotten masses, those forced to live beneath society's surface. By lifting the rats into the elite space of a fine restaurant, the protesters symbolically confront the upper class with the reality they try to ignore. The rat's presence reminds the system that these lives, often treated as waste or invisible still exist and demand recognition.

Another incident involving a rat occurs when a woman holds up a rat in front of people's face. "A performance piece it seemed" (DeLillo 38). This moment reflects how, in the eyes of many, protests are no longer seen as meaningful acts of resistance but as mere performance. For the majority of onlookers, such displays provoke momentary curiosity rather than genuine concern or engagement. More importantly, for those in power, protest is often dismissed entirely, reduced to street theatre, noise or absurdity. At the very beginning of novel, Eric Packer is seen conversing with his currency analyst, Michael Chin. During their discussion, Eric makes a striking comment, "A rat becomes the unit of

currency" (DeLillo). This statement critiques the instability and absurdity of financial systems. As a young currency trader, Eric rose to immense wealth by anticipating the volatile shifts in market voices. He understands that money itself has no intrinsic value it not rooted in physical reality but in shared social belief. The power of currency lies not in its material form whether coin, paper, or digital data bit in the collective agreement that it holds worth. This aligns closely with postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, where representations replace reality and simulations are treated as truth when Eric remarks that even a rat can become a unit of currency it illustrates the collapse of symbolic value when meaning is longer needed to any stable reality, and value becomes absurd and surreal.

In another notable incident, the protest resembled a form of street performance, blurring the boundaries between political act and theatrical spectacle. A group of protestors carried an enormous Styrofoam rat which was approximately twenty feet tall hoisted above their heads as it weaved through traffic, "dodging taxis in the street". This oversized rat really becomes a symbol of ordinary people, the ones who are pushed into margins, living in poverty, often unseen and ignored. Just like rats live underground in basements, sewers, or drainage areas, these people are forced to survive beneath the surface of a glamorous, hyper-capitalist city. While the rich enjoy comfort and visibility, the poor live with constant struggle, instability and neglect. So when protesters bring the rat into the streets, they're not just mocking money, they're exposing how money decides who gets to live on the surface and who gets buried beneath. It shows us the deep, ugly inequality of a system where wealth decides your worth not humanity.

So in today's late capitalist society, protest is often reduced to performance. It 's no longer always about political urgency or real impact, instead it gets absorbed into media and consumer culture, where it's just something to watch. According to Jean Baudrillard, that in our postmodern condition, the constant overflow of information ultimately



diminishes meaning. In this our world, even strong or emotional protests can lose their impact, as the media quickly takes them in and turns them into just another part of the constant flow of images and stories.

Violence in the name of Protest

Now, when symbolic resistance like these fails to disrupt power structures, what happens? Sometimes, violence becomes the only remaining language of protest. Frantz Fanon argues this in his *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he states that, for the oppressed, violence can be a way to reclaim identity and break free from helplessness. In *Cosmopolis*, Eric's limousine is attacked by a large group of protesters, reflecting growing public anger and unrest. People from over forty countries are involved, some with their heads bleeding, others wearing ski masks. The scene is chaotic, full of anger and frustration.

Eric Packer may be seen as a symbol of capitalist society. However, harming him does not significantly impact the system, as he is not the system itself merely a product of it. During his journey to the barbershop, Eric stops at a restaurant where he is suddenly attacked by a man. After wiping the blood from his face, his bodyguard, Torval, quickly intervenes and kills the attacker. The man is later identified as Andre Petrescu, also known for targeting powerful individuals. His actions appear to be an attempt to gain the attention of the elite. While such attacks may disrupt power temporarily, they remain highly dangerous, especially considering the constant protection surrounding figures like Eric. Andre expresses his anger towards systemic power when he says, "This is my mission worldwide. To sabotage power and wealth" (DeLillo, 142). He claims to have stalked Eric for years and even ignored the U.S. President to target him instead. His statement reflects a symbolic attempt to challenge the structures of wealth and influence. Similar actions are seen in the real world, where individuals direct their frustrations at powerful figures. However, such acts rarely lead to meaningful change, as they

confront individuals rather than the systems that sustain inequality.

During protest, it's often unavoidable that public property gets damaged or that bystanders are affected. That's the reality of civil unrest. But there's a line and crossing into self-harm or suicide to make a statement is heartbreaking. It shows deep seriousness, but sadly, it doesn't bring real change. A life lost in protest cannot be returned. In this novel, one man set himself on fire, an act of self-immolation. This moment deeply affects Eric. Up until then, he's been emotionally distant from the world around him. But watching someone take their own life in protest shakes him. It becomes a turning point, not for the world but for Eric's own understanding of pain, resistance and power. As DeLillo writes, "To say something to make people think" (DeLillo, 100). That's what the act was meant to do, to force people, like Eric, to finally see and feel what they've ignored for so long. This tragic act of self-immolation becomes a turning point in Eric Packer's journey. It forces Eric to confront the real cost of resistance. Because here's the truth, the act doesn't change the system. It doesn't bring any political shift. But it does break through Eric's numbness. This is where Michel Foucault's idea becomes powerful, he means that resistance is never outside power but it's always tied to it, shaped by it. Even something as extreme as self-destruction happens within the same system that causes it. So in this case, the man who burns himself is both erased by the system and defined by it. For Eric, this moment is not about understanding the protester's politics. It's about witnessing real, human pain, something he's spent most of his life avoiding.

Conclusion

The death of the man who sets himself on fire begins to shift something in Eric. But it's his final conversation with Benno Levin, the man who eventually kills him, that really pushes Eric into an existential collapse. Benno, a former employee of Eric's had been waiting, stalking and even buying a gun with the sole purpose of killing him. And in the



end, he does. But before that, they share a long, strange, almost philosophical conversation. This moment is important because it shows a how even a conversation can deeply affect someone not violence, not protest. Eric doesn't fight back. It becomes clear that, underneath the billionaire facade, Eric still carries something from the street from ordinary life. That's why he feels the pain, the absurdity, the emptiness. He doesn't want to live anymore not because he's afraid of death but because the world has stopped making sense to him.

But at the same time, we shouldn't assume this would happen to all people in power. Eric is unique. More powerful figures are far more insulated and emotionally distant. So attacking or insulting one person won't change the system because these individuals don't act as people, they act as functions of the system. They become symbols, not humans. And hurting a symbol rarely dismantles what it represents. So in *Cosmopolis*, we see protest in many forms, some symbolic, some violent, some deeply emotional. But what's striking is that none of these

protests really manage to break the system. From people carrying rats in the streets to a man setting himself on fire from physical attacks to philosophical conversations, all of it either gets absorbed, ignored, or dismissed. And that leave us with a question, in a world where everything even protest becomes part of the spectacle, what kind of resistance actually works? Maybe it's not the grand or dramatic gestures, but the quiet, collective ones that slowly shift awareness and reclaim meaning from the system. Real protest isn't about noise or performance. It's about standing firm even when no one listens and believing that resistance itself is a form of hope.

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