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A CyberUrban Space Odyssey

The Spatiality of Contemporary Social Movements

Merlyna Lim

From #egyptrevolution to #occupyhongkong to #blacklivesmatter, from the Tahrir Square in Cairo to the Civic Square in Hong Kong to Times Square in New York, we have witnessed numerous protests and mass movements take place across the globe. Although the causes, goals, and relative success or failure of each differ, one to the other, all share two features in common: each event was intricately networked through the use of social media and each materialized in the mass occupation of a public urban space, in the streets or square of a major city. Although these commonalities have been previously noted, the connection between these two features remains inadequately studied. How can we better understand the interplay between social media and the occupation of urban spaces? How do spaces contribute to insurgent activities and social movements? To what extent do contemporary movements need both cyberspace and physical space to assert influence within a political state?

By treating cyberspace as a technical realm separate from physical space, much current research tends to delocalize what are intensely contextually specific contestations. Disconnecting cyberactivism from its local contexts has led some scholars to view the power of cyber technologies as socially and politically autonomous and space transcending. This, in turn, has suggested a transformation of politics and society both linear and inevitable: it has endowed ordinary people with greater political freedom to create a virtually empowered civil society that can better pursue—and secure—just political outcomes. Over the years, much of the naiveté that characterizes this thinking has been tempered by more nuanced research on limitations as well as potentialities of cyberactivism. However, the volume of writing that implicitly proposes that revolutions can occur principally, if not solely, through cyberactivism is nevertheless now very large.

For its part, the literature of cyberactivism tends to simply assume that urban physical sites of political contestations are unproblematically available. Focused on the virtual realm, it speculates about whether online mobilizations by themselves lead to political change. Without a close reading of online-offline connections, studies in this mode understandably arrive at mixed outcomes, ranging

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from negative or no impact to complete success. Studies focused on the physical sites of political insurgencies, on the other hand, often fail to factor digital media networks into their analyses. Without explicit consideration of the reflexivity of spatial interactions, these studies fall short of offering insights both specific to a given experience and general to the relationship between society and digital technology.

That said, the past three decades have witnessed a spatial turn—a shift toward geographically sensitive work that is attentive to context, difference, and the preeminence of locale. Sociologists of space, such as Georg Simmel, Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, and especially Henri Lefebvre, provided the necessary foundation for subsequent work by Marxist thinkers, such as David Harvey, Edward Soja, and Doreen Massey, that reintroduced spatial consciousness into the social sciences and that prominently place spatial analysis within social theory.[01] To extend this line of thinking, I offer a spatial reading and analysis of social movements that incorporates a close reading of the movements' relationship to cyberurban space. Here I use "cyberurban space" as an umbrella term to describe the fluid and complex spatial landscape we live in, with its blurred boundaries between cyber and physical space. Today, more than 50 percent of the world population lives in areas characterized as urban; that percentage is projected to increase to 66 percent by 2050.[02] In 2015, around 40 percent (3.1 billion) of the world population has an internet connection and more than 90 percent of this population lives in urban areas.[03]

At the heart of the dichotomy of cyberactivism vs. place-based spatial analysis is the fallacy of spatial dualism, where the online realm—that is, the digital, the cyber, or the virtual—is treated differently than the offline realm—the physical, or the real. This "digital dualist" perspective is undoubtedly rooted in early works on cyberspace, such as Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen*,[04] which operates under the assumption that the "digital self" of the "life on the screen" is "second" to the "first self" of the "real life" in the physical world.[05] Much recent empirical research shows, however, that digital media is rooted or embedded in, and entangled with, the physical world. It is imperative to challenge this spatial dualism and abandon the assumption that online and offline, cyber and physical, are separate entities. Instead, cyberurban space is socially constructed as contemporaneous space in the contemporary world in which we live. It is produced in the interaction of, and within a continuum of, online and offline relations. For those who live in urban areas where everyday experiences are heavily mediated by electronic gadgets and screens, the boundaries between the lives we live digitally and those we live physically are increasingly blurred. With our perpetual connectedness to the internet, especially through social media, the division of online and offline is rendered meaningless. Rather than oppose the "real," the "virtual" has become part of it—of our "real" lives. Hence, the cyberurban space is a fluid hybrid within which we live and our social practices take place. Online and offline, digital and physical, virtual and material: no one of these experiences is any more real than the other.

Having rejected the notion of spatial dualism, we can now approach the making of contemporary social movements as a process that takes place within the space-time continuum. Social movements are essentially about people engaging with power; these movements entail social processes and relations that are historical as well as spatial. Power can be understood as the structural capacity of a certain individual or group to impose its will over another's.[06] In this context, social movements thus can be understood as a collective endeavour to resist, challenge, and negotiate the relationship with this structural capacity, or can be termed "counter-power." Power relations, like other social relations, unfold in space. To think about power and counter-power is, therefore, to invoke a set of spatial relations. Space is not merely a location, or a container in which power relations are negotiated, resisted, and challenged. Rather, space frequently constitutes an object of contestation (of power) in its own right. Power works *in* and *over* spaces. Cyberurban spaces provide sites for contestations of power (and counter-power) and are themselves part of the contests over access, control, and representation.

In order to scrutinize the complex entanglement of cyberurban spaces in the making and development of contemporary social movements, it is useful to group this analysis under three headings: *imaginaries*, *practices*, and *trajectories*. A social movement can be seen as a composite of abstract and concrete acts from and in space involving corporeal and cognitive bodies. This composite can be traced from its genesis (in the *imaginary* realm) through its successive developments (involving *practices* of participation, organization, protest, and symbolic activities) to its unfolding as interconnected events along a continuum (its *trajectory*), which takes place within multiple spatialities.

The Imaginaries of Social Movements

Imagination is one of the most important mechanisms for drawing together a community as well as for facilitating an expression of collective resistance. Imagination allows the collectives to project themselves beyond the present to envision a different, more desirable future. Social movements start from this ability to imagine. Alex Khasnabish

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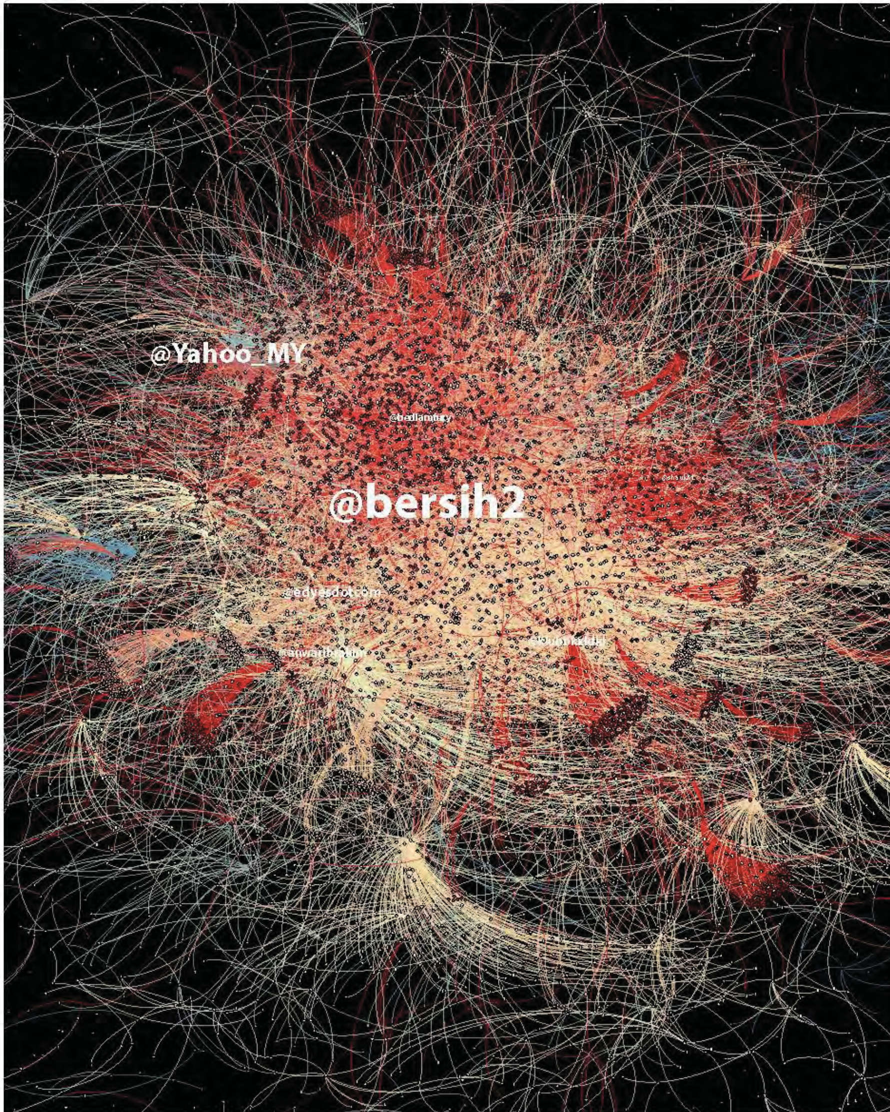

Connective actions can support collective actions to expand the network of social movement. The map illustrates a form of connective actions facilitated by Twitter that supported and expanded the network of the Malaysian Bersih 3.0 movement. This map was created using Gephi (a social network analytic software) based on tweets generated on the Bersih protest day on April 28, 2012, 1:00 to 7:00 p.m.

and Max Haiven argue that such movements are convened by individuals who share a radical understanding and imagination of the world.[07] They contend that radical imagination is the platform upon which to build solidarity and from which to struggle against oppression in the form of robust and resilient movements.[08]

In societies in which people are oppressed or repressed, power is exercised through the propagation of dominant socio-political imaginaries that leave no space for alternative, radical imaginaries to develop. The imaginaries of the State tend to express and re-inscribe power. To radically depart from dominant imaginaries means to have sites for alternative and radical imagination to emerge, grow, and spread; sites for narratives of resistance to be created, communicated, and practiced. These are sites where adherents ascertain the possibilities of resistance through everyday practices and that allow for interactivity and exchange to take place.

Imagination is a process by which we collectively map the present, narrate it as the result of the past, and then speculate on the future. It is a process that is both cognitive and corporeal that involves the specific (certain political issues) and the mundane (the everyday). By oscillating within a fluid realm between the material and the immaterial, cyberurban space potentially generates more alternative sites for radical imaginations than either physical space or cyberspace could on its own. When traditional civic sites such as mosques and universities are policed

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The map illustrates how social space is practiced materially and immaterially. It show the physical location (geotagged map) of some tweets from April 28, 2012, at 2:00 p.m., during Malaysian Bersih 3.0 protest; there are high concentrations of tweets coming from spots where the protesters congregated in corporeal/ material sense.

and depoliticized and labor unions are destroyed, as was the case in Egypt prior to the 2011 uprisings, social media becomes one initial site where resistance can be fostered and radical imagining can take place.[09] In a different scenario, where the internet and social media platforms are highly disposed to control and censorship by the State, as was the situation in Hong Kong in 2014, activists make use of traditional sites (school and university classrooms, in this case) to cultivate imaginaries of an alternative future for the society, keeping these brain-storming sessions free of the use of electronic gadgets. Alternative imaginaries become possible not merely through the availability and use of social media, nor through access to less controlled physical sites alone, but because activists can manipulate the power projected in space by effectively navigating between material and immaterial realms. Alternating between the materiality and immateriality of cyberurban space, the imaginaries of social movements find their place to start and gestate before developing and spreading to wider arenas.

This conceptualization of cyberurban space as hybrid in nature offers not only more possibilities but also more challenges. With the disappearance of traditional public places in contemporary urban life, social media emerges as new social networks and sociocultural contexts from which radical imagination can emerge. However, social media platforms are neither inherent nor friendly to radical imaginaries projects. Social and cultural spaces of social media are largely dominated by corporations (and other capitalist actors), disposing the take-over by narratives of imagination tailored for the contemporary culture of consumption. The imaginaries that dominate social media are based on simple, simplified, and oversimplified narratives that reduce social and cultural complexities to consumable bytes.[10] Given that the radical imagination is a terrain of political struggle that represents a complex agent-driven collectivism, it is not reducible to ideology and/or narratives in any simplistic sense of consciousness or fetishism.[11] In this regard, social media alone does not provide an autonomous and fertile environment for fomenting the radical imagination. For any radical imaginaries project to prevail in social media, it would require repeatedly "hacking" the dominant consumer culture—that is, invading, subverting, intercepting, and disrupting that culture, such as in a form of culture jamming.

The limitations of social media in facilitating the radical imagination to emerge and grow speak directly to the need for sites where corporeal assemblies can take place. In such assemblies, corporeal bodies would congregate and interact with each other to collectively nurture the imaginaries project. While we use our cognitive minds to imagine, the imagination itself is "corporeal and embodied." As Max Haiven and Khasnabish explain,

> Our imagination is not seated in the mind but involves our senses, feeling and the way we move our bodies in the world. Bodies that are marked, exploited or circumscribed, will imagine the world and their personal and political potentialities very differently than those that "pass" without notice, fear or exploitation in the world.[12]

The Practices of Social Movements

Social movements involve a set of practices that render mobilizations possible and sustain them in various ways. From the existing literature on social movement

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theory, we learn that the practices of social movements can be clustered into four categories: participation, organization, protest, and symbolic activities.[13] Participation includes practices through which social movement actors engage other individuals to join in the various stages of the movement; in the early stage, for example, or at the height of mobilization.[14] Organization practices include "social practices through which activists are able to plan meetings, arrange protests, and coordinate actions."[15] Protest practices entail "the performance of public protests," and symbolic practices include "those social practices linked to the development of discourses, meanings and interpretations about contentious issues and protests."[16]

In the predigital era, these practices were clustered based on where social movement actors were physically located. In our contemporary world, the practices of social movements are structured under the logic of network that can transcend the barrier of space and time and thus can challenge space-time-bound relations.[17] And, yet, the logic of network is not placeless. In cyberurban space, the networks connect practices of social movements in specific places—spaces that acquire meaning through identity politics in certain moments in time—to specific information and communication flows.

In the practices of participation, activists continue to recruit new participants by connecting with traditional civic associations, such as churches, universities, and schools in the initial stage of Hong Kong's Occupy Central movement, and mosques in the Bersih (electoral reform) movement in Malaysia, or with social and cultural clusters, such as soccer fan clubs in Egypt.[18] These practices, however, also extend to new types of social networks facilitated by social media and blogospheres. In the 2011 Egypt uprisings, the April 6 Youth Movement—one of the main organizers of the Tahrir protests—made use of Facebook to expand its recruitment network, while also cultivating its existing network of labor activist composed of textile factory workers.[19] Such practices connecting traditional and new civic spaces pervade today's social movements because social media spaces are now intimately entangled with our everyday social practices—a reality that cannot be separated from the disappearance of public and communal spaces, the deterioration of traditional social networks, and the decline of social capital.[20]

Similar patterns can be found within the practices of organization and protest, even though they sometimes differ from one context to another. In places where the internet population is low and access to social media is unequally distributed, such as in Egypt and Tunisia, meetings and other coordinating actions still need to take advantage of traditional networks, in addition to online social networking platforms. By December 2010, Tunisia counted only one million Facebook users, concentrated in Tunis and the surrounding area.[21] In villages and towns located in the interior regions that lacked internet infrastructure, protests were coordinated over a hybrid network combining mobile phones, pocket cameras, community radios, coffee houses, and face-to-face conversations.[22] The Bersih movement offers a different story. In Malaysia, internet penetration is above 60 percent: in urban areas, where much of the activism of the movement took place, the rate is even higher (in Greater Kuala Lumpur, for example, it is 87 percent). In this movement, nearly all organizational practices were facilitated online.[23] Activists publicized public events on websites and blogs, planned meetings and coordinated actions prior to the protests on Facebook, and used Twitter during the protests as an on-site networking tool.[24]

Since the "Battle of Seattle" in 1999, activists have started extending the philosophy of activism and direct action to "the world of electronic information exchange and communication" by employing a set of tactics called online direct action (ODA).[25] Some earlier forms of ODA (for instance, online petitions, virtual sit-ins, and hacktivism) were developed as digital analogues to traditional tactics (paper petitions, physical sit-ins, and sabotage). As the prevalence of social media increased, practices of protest extended into the spheres of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the like. Currently, one of the most popular types of social media–based protest is "hashtag activism," an effort to collectively curate a massive amount of short statements by using certain hashtags.[26] The new social media terrain offers endless possibilities to facilitate protest and, especially, symbolic activities. By joining in #blacklivesmatter, for example, an individual might participate not only in the protest against the police violence against black youths but also in discourses around relevant issues such as institutionalized racism and state violence. In addition, the individual might also express his or her own interpretation of the issues.

However, physical sites of assembly are still important to the corporeal practices of protest and its symbolism. Staging protests on the main streets and in the public squares of a city is still perceived as the most effective way to collectively express resistance, demonstrate the strength of a movement, and directly challenge the dominant power.[27] Bodies, in their visibility to the public, are central in the struggle for power. The body itself is the site of both subjugation and resistance.[28] Protest is, according to a sociologist Theresa O'Keefe, "intimately connected to corporeal realities whereby the dissenting

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body disrupts—literally and figuratively—by presence and action."[29] By occupying public spaces with visible bodies, social movements challenge the dominant power both symbolically and corporeally.

Evidently, the practices of contemporary social movements are not removed from the territorial character of momentous movements in the history of humanity. Instead, they extend "from the space of places to the space of flows."[30] In the contemporary social movement, cyberurban space is not simply a backdrop, a site, or a point of struggle; it is also a *resource* for participation, organization, protest, and symbolic practices.

The Trajectories of Social Movements

Social movements are transient phenomena: they arise, they develop, they interact with power (the authority and/or mainstream politics), they fade, and then they are gone, leaving behind a residue or impact. A social movement therefore encompasses multiple events within its trajectory. These "events"—meaning the various actions enacted by various actors in and around a shared imaginary—do not occur in isolation from each other. They are interconnected, interacting with each other.

The interconnections between events are germane to the life cycles of social movements (also known as "protest cycles").[31] The dynamics of these cycles are complex, influenced by internal and external circumstances including larger economic cycles, and they are beyond the scope of this article.[32] However, the role of space and spatiality in sustaining the life cycle of a social movement at various junctures along its trajectory is important to consider here. Borrowing from Pamela Oliver and Daniel Myers, we can conceive of a social movement as a distribution of events across a population.[33] A social movement starts with an event, is sustained by more events, rises when many events happen involving a large proportion of the population, and fades when it stops generating future events.

In cyberurban space, events are networked and their boundaries are porous. Through numerous labyrinths of cyberurban space, information and narrative of resistance as well as their embodied emotion and sentiment can travel and diffuse from one event to another. Contemporary social movements make use of hybrid spatial networks connecting diverse sites and localities, involving traditional and new social linkages, old and new media, and large and small media within the cyber, physical, and interstitial spaces of the cyberurban milieu. In the event that one media channel becomes blocked, information finds its way through other available channels, like rainwater running on the streets. This is the beauty of the hybrid network. It offers information paths of least resistance. The multitiered system is fully redundant and resilient, ensuring that no information can be halted, even in the case of a technological blackout. In Egypt, when the Mubarak regime cut off virtually all internet access in an effort to contain the protests, Egyptians connected to each other in person and through traditional networks, leading to more participation in the uprisings. In the case of Occupy Central in Hong Kong, in anticipation of the internet shutdown and to avoid remote detection from the Chinese authorities, Firechat, a meshed phone-to-phone network application, was used to sustain interconnections between events.

The diffusion of information has a direct consequence on the proliferation of protests. As information easily travels from one place to another, the struggle for justice, freedom, and dignity journey with it; connecting not only one mobile phone to another but also an individual to various networks of individuals and to a network of networks. These hybrid human-communication-information networks in cyberurban space form connective structures that link one event to another, from the local to the national to the global and vice versa. These connective structures help social movements to generate collective actions in various locales among individuals who share collective identity and act upon it by reproducing the protests. Beyond this, connective structures also help by linking collective actions with individuals who perform connective actions. In contrast to collective actions, where group actions coalesce around collective identities, in connective actions people contribute to movements through personalized expressions facilitated by their online connectivity.[34] Because connective actions rely on loose ties formed by digital communications networks, they are temporal and transient in nature. At times, connective actions can support collective actions to expand the network of social movement. At other times, they can also conflict with collective actions. If connective actions hijack and weaken collective actions, a movement may lose deeper forms of engagement needed to sustain itself.

The redundancy of hybrid networks in cyberurban space is significant to the trajectories of social movements, particularly for two reasons. First, an ability to move fluidly between the various networks of cyberurban space (be they physical or virtual) is important for navigating control and hegemony. By being able to appear and disappear, become visible and invisible, be present and hidden from the gaze and control of authority, a social movement can maintain and protect its existence while expanding its participation and replicating its events in multiple sites. Second, by diffusing in multiple networks, the movement can propagate a decentralized and distributed network of

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resistance, which by its very nature is robust and resilient. In times of crisis, the movement may disappear from the public space, but it may not completely perish. Instead, its roots may grow and start another cycle.

Conclusions

Power is not an easy entity to observe. The act of exercising power, however, is observable as it unfolds in space. Social movements are about the engagement of power by collectivized individuals and, therefore, are most visible as they act toward space: contesting it, occupying it, claiming it. By analyzing social movements spatially, this study has exposed cyberurban space as not only the *site for* but also a *part of* the contestation of power. This hybrid space has emerged as integral to the initiating and development of contemporary social movements. Its fluidity and resilience suggest that cyberurban space will continue to be part of any future social movement, presenting new possibilities as well as new complexities and challenges for protests' imaginaries, practices, and trajectories.

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