

Occupy Wall Street: From Representation to Post-Representation

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Trying to assess something as recent and dynamic as Occupy Wall Street (OWS) presents problems for political analysts. There is always a danger that by the time one has written in judgement the event-movement will have morphed into something quite different. For this reason alone we need to be careful about offering too definitive a judgment on what it represents, about what we think is new in the phenomenon as well as what we think presents linkages to the past. On the one hand, OWS is still in the process of becoming-*something*. On the other hand, though, we can see the outline of more or less familiar characteristics that might help orientate us towards something that is being greeted as a new departure.

OWS is, it seems, a 'non-affiliated', non-programmatic, 'disorganised' set of protests, interconnected virtually through a variety of social media, drawing attention to gross inequalities of wealth and power ('we are the 99%').

The first half of the description should give us the clues we need to trace the lineage and ancestry of the initiative. In particular it tells us what OWS is *not*, namely a political party or a single issue social movement with a neat hierarchy and formal structure, or a published manifesto outlining clear aims and objectives that will address inequities and injustices. It's an odd stance at first glance – to define oneself by what one isn't, as opposed to what one is. How do we make sense of the gesture?

Firstly, history is littered with disaffiliated, non-programmatic groups who wanted to contest inequality in quite general terms. Groups such as the Ranters and Levellers, which sprang up during the English Civil War in 1600s, display many such characteristics. Some of them such as Gerrard Winstanley's True Levellers even occupied space in ways that resonate with OWS – that is, through occupation as a political 'act' whose intention was to draw attention to inequalities of wealth and income (Hill 1975, pp.132-9). Many of the early resistances to the enclosure of the commons, to clearance of land for 'improvement', and to capitalism more broadly, had this quality to them, and not just in Britain. However, with the emergence of 'organised' politics over the course of the nineteenth century – in the form of political parties, elections, the 'free press' and the rest of the paraphernalia of liberal-democracy – direct action as a *style* of politics receded (even if it didn't disappear entirely).

Representation thus became paradigmatic of 'the political', even when that

politics was oppositional or counter-hegemonic. Political parties came to represent classes, needs, interests. Governments represented nations, the People. Representation thus consecrated what Hardt and Negri (2004, p. 241) term a 'disjunctive synthesis': the creation of aggregate entities through a process of separation – a separation of elites from masses, of governors from the governed, of those with power from those without power. Politics became bureaucratized, normal, serious, rational. For mainstream politics, this meant putting clear water between the wayward emotions of the mob and the wisdom of the political class. For counter-hegemonic politics, the party guaranteed that those with the 'correct' analysis of the 'line of march' would keep the 'trade union' or reformist instincts of the masses in check. Politics thus became the preserve of the few, the oligarchs.

Organised politics of this kind dominated the period of social democracy, the birth of the welfare state, and of 'cradle to grave' entitlements. Political docility mirrored domestic docility, all built on a cosy compact between citizen and state ('you let us govern and we'll guarantee jobs and prosperity'). Yet just as economic wealth underpinned the consolidation of organised politics, so too did economic uncertainty, unrest and crisis fuel more grassroots and disorganised forms of politics.

1968, the year of disorganised revolts and insurrections, is an important way marker for change in the nature of the political. It marked the first step in the decline of the representational paradigm, and the re-emergence of non- or 'post-representative' political repertoires: direct action, squatting, affinity groups, protests, carnivals. Many of these initiatives are sparked by a self-conscious rejection of 'normal' or mainstream political processes. They turn their face on parties, elections, and manifestos in favour of the immediacy of action, of doing, in the here and now – not saving our energies for some scripted 'crisis of capitalism'.

The 1970s and 1980s were periods when much of this kind of activity was subsumed within what became known as 'new social movements', which included movements against war, the nuclear bomb, environmental degradation, race and identity discrimination. They were immediate, direct, and 'dis'-organised in the sense of not being tied to a permanent bureaucracy or set of offices. Often leaderless, acephalous, sometimes spontaneous, unruly and difficult to predict. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 22) famously coined the term 'rhizomatic' to describe 'subterranean' underground initiatives of this kind. The rhizome makes us distinguish between the liminal and the subliminal, between what 'expert' commentary sees above, and what lurks beneath the surface. Even when 'nothing seems to be happening', rhizome-networks can be growing, developing, readying themselves for the next opportunity to push through the surface and emerge in unpredictable ways. Such has become the pattern of post-representative, disorganised politics over the past four decades.

So in the current conjuncture the representative paradigm reigns, just about. And we still have periods where nothing seems to be happening outside of the mainstream political process, voting, elections and politicians. It is at this point when it becomes easy for commentary to lament the 'apathy' and 'boredom' of the young, our disengagement from the political process, reluctance to participate etc. Then, 'suddenly', there will be an eruption from below, from the subterranean stratum, that reminds us that politics is not just about politicians. Sometimes this kind of politics has an immediate and radical impact. The fall of communism in Eastern Europe looked much like this. The 'Arab Spring' has a similar epoch-making aspect to it. Sometimes such politics is easy to write off as 'ineffectual' or 'gestural' as in the Seattle Protests, the protests against the G8, Reclaim the Streets, the World Social Forum, the Clandestine Insurrectionary Revolutionary Clown Army (CIRCA). Sometimes we can wait for months or years before knowing what kind of resonance or longer-term impact an initiative will have. How much impact has the Zapatista insurrection had, or the Narmada Dam protests, or the uprising in Nandigram, or the rise of the *Indignados*? Difficult to tell.

OWS is part of this story. It offers further evidence that the paradigm of representative politics, the politics of political parties, elections and voting is on the wane. Participants in OWS proclaim that they not programmatic, that it has no answers, even that it is not 'politically affiliated'. It contrasts itself with the style and manner of forms of representation that by contrast proclaim an analysis, an ideology, a programme, an organisation representing distinct interests, viewpoints and actors. OWS challenges this paradigm, directly. It tells us that no form of representative politics, no political party, can change the basic coordinates of the liberal-democratic capitalist system. In this horizon only a 'disorganised' repertoire of direct and immediate political actions enables people to be 'heard' as opposed to being subsumed within the machinic meta-mobilism of 'normal' politics. 'Not in my Name' is an emblematic expression of this winding back of the representative paradigm. It says that I will not be annexed for a larger purpose. I must myself speak to and embody the changes we need in order to address inequality.

This however is the easy part, for a paradoxical feature of post-representative politics is that it does not, as the post- prefix reminds us, escape the *pragmatics* of representation; it brings it into question. 'We are the 99%' is after all a quintessential *representative* claim ('We are you', a slogan borrowed from the Zapatistas, is another equally direct example). Here we see also a potential immobilising quality of OWS, one that infects all post-representative initiatives. If it cannot *but* represent, then how to do this without becoming itself a symptom of the politics it so sets its face against – i.e. representative politics (Saward 2010)? How does OWS escape the trap of opposing representative modes of political engagement in a non-representative way? How to escape the apparently futile and self-denying gesture of 'post-representative' representation?

Not an easy question, which is why, as many commentators have argued,

immobilism and inefficacy seem at one level built into OWS; this point has even been raised by those who are sympathetic to the movement. Think of Slavoj Žižek's appeal to OWS to repeat Lenin's question: 'What is to be Done?' (Žižek 2011). However, this is to look at OWS through the lens of those whose logic is itself queried by the OWS initiative – those who see politics as a 'sovereign' activity in which power is deployed to achieve ends in a narrow, instrumental and exclusionary way. How to escape the cul-de-sac? Several possibilities present themselves to those who valorise OWS and wish to see it develop as a style and form of politics:

1. Accept the very *event-ness* of the event-movement. As McKenzie Wark (2011) reminds us, the Situationists urged us to think of politics not in linear terms, but in terms of *intensities* for the participants as well as for the bystander. Those who take part in the event of OWS will never be the same again: they are changed, angered, energised, despondent, angry, alienated, joyous. Those who encounter OWS may display complete indifference, or they may be affected. Somehow. Something might resonate. They may ask themselves a David Byrne type question: 'How did I get here?' Mini-micro political gestures. But sometimes large-scale change comes from micro-gestures – the first step on a long journey, to paraphrase Gandhi.
2. Accept the positioning of OWS as one amongst a series of resonances and gestures that collectively add up to something more than a gesture-less politics. As my comments above indicate, OWS is *one kind* of resistance that 'represents' in its *post-representativity* the response of those at the margin of wealthy countries of the metropolitan centre; the Zapatista insurrection (to take a contrasting example) is another kind of resistance, one characteristic of the needs and resources of groups at the global periphery. They are both concerned with the same issue: the monopolisation of power and wealth in the hands of the few. They are both pertinent to the contexts and capacities of people on the ground in a particular time and space. They resonate in different ways, they have different effects, but their concerns are very similar.
3. Accept that OWS is a stance of what Hardt and Negri would no doubt label 'refusal', as opposed to affirmation. This is not to say that it cannot prefigure or point at alternative forms of organisation, and being-together. It self-consciously positions itself as a puzzle, as a 'no' without a 'yes'. Lest it be forgotten, refusal can be just as potent a means of change as affirmation. Gandhi saw this, Havel saw it, and so have the millions of campaigners who have collectively refused colonial, racist or exclusionary policies and practices, and who have therefore become agents delegitimising them. It might strike us as odd to see 'weapons of the weak' (to mobilise James Scott) being exerted under mature democratic conditions (Scott, 1985). We are perhaps unused to the idea of the vote-wielding citizen

as 'weak', as 'dispossessed', and as having to call upon similar tactics to those at the global periphery who live in non- or sub-democratic conditions.

But then here is the larger issue. Liberal-democracy is being hollowed out by the growth of often-unaccountable global institutions and processes, such as the IMF, the World Bank and most recently the bond markets. In this sense, OWS is not just a gesture in opposition to representation. It is a gesture marking the slow yet seemingly inexorable collapse of representative democratic governance as a practice and as the paradigmatic 'end of history'. Representative governance is, on the contrary, increasingly seen as complicit in *the emptying out* of democracy, and in the perpetuation of gross inequalities. OWS is part of the generalised revolt against representation. It asks to re-imagine democracy as an instrument of the 99% as opposed to something that operates as the handmaiden of global capitalism, and the 1%.

As my comments above indicate, such a gesture should not be seen as in itself novel or radically different to the demands of myriad individuals and groups throughout modernity. What *is* perhaps novel is the globality, the speed, and resonant effects of such a gesture. It is now evident that it is not just global financial transactions that travel at the speed of light, but the righteous indignation of the many millions subject to the capricious, over-arching power of the plutocrats and those lined up to represent them and their interests.

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