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### Putting our spaces in order: the occupation of political culture

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ROGIER VAN REEKUM

PUTTING OUR SPACES IN ORDER  
THE OCCUPATION OF POLITICAL CULTURE<sup>1</sup>

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‘Even if the Occupy Wall Street movement were to begin to peter out because of exhaustion or repression, it has already succeeded and will leave a lasting legacy, just as the uprisings of 1968 did.’  
– Immanuel Wallerstein, 2011

‘What’s political or cultural about political culture?’  
– Margaret Somers, 2008 [1995]

‘The Occupy Wall Street movements in the United States are saying something very specific: that inequality, in the end, is an inequality of power and we need to redistribute power, not just money.’  
– Giorgos Papandreou, 2011

The big idea that has emerged in current attempts to understand the Occupy movement is that it has actually achieved ‘something’. This somewhat appeasing statement is not meant to deflate or ignore the achievements and prospects of the movement. What I mean to point out is the striking extent to which actually doing ‘something’ in public space, even only gaining a measure of mainstream recognition for certain grievances,

is the omni-recurrent motif in interpretations of what Occupy represents. To generalize, almost all reactions, from CNN to Žižek, note that a remarkable opening in the ideological landscape has taken place, hence the name acquired by the movement: ‘Occupy!’ Occupy happened with the coming together of a whole range of processes, among them a call by *Adbusters* magazine to occupy Wall Street, the encampments on Tahrir square, the so-called ‘Arab spring’ more generally, the Spanish *indignados*, the occupation of the Wisconsin State Capitol, the notion of the 99%, the financial crisis of 2008, the austerity measures imposed in response, Wikileaks, the wars, the deception, the World Social Forum and the learning curve of alterglobalist activism, the increasing visibility of failing US hegemony, and unfortunately the utter failure of American democracy, a failure now spreading to other places in the West. What Occupy subsequently became and how it has been able to make a mark is quite a different story. In what follows, I want to argue that an appreciation of Occupy’s dramaturgical form (cf. Demby 2011; Alexander 2011) – it did ‘something’ in public space – helps us to recognize an aspect of the protests that may not be at the forefront of many substantive agendas, but is nonetheless taking place and, I hope, taking hold.

The art of interpellating the state

The idea of effecting social change through protesting in public is familiar enough. There is a script which everyone more or less understands and abides by. I’ll rehearse my understanding of it here in some detail. What happens when people take up public protest, striving to translate their anger and grief into demands and accountability?

Well, people emerge from their homes and typically amass into a crowd, ostensibly visible and disruptive of the normal scene outside. The presence of the crowd not only disrupts our senses, but it also disrupts assumptions about what people may be capable of. A crowd is a dangerous entity, not least for the people that compose it. What one does becomes inextricably embedded in what others are doing (Canetti 1960). Everyone becomes keenly aware of being massive. This points to a very particular aspect of

protesting crowds. There are a lot of different ways to contest: argument, proclamation, obstruction, ridicule, provocation, direct action, sacrifice, iconoclasm, etc. All of these may involve crowds, but they do not capture what gives a crowd power as such. Of themselves, protesting crowds have political force, because the dissolution of bodily control is so very frightening. It is precisely the *threat* of becoming massive, lawless and unpredictable that makes protesting crowds powerful: ‘do something to make us go away or else we’ll grow bigger and even we don’t know what will happen then!’ In this sense, a crowd *is* already a demand well before anyone has posed one: ‘govern us!’ The point of amassing a crowd is not, I would argue, to indefinitely be a crowd. The demand it embodies is not: ‘let us be a crowd!’ The demand, rather, is: ‘govern society in such a way that we may be integrated in it once more!’ Protesting crowds demand attention, recognition of their anger and responsive actions on the part of the authorities. Even if crowds become vehicles of revolution, they demand *better* governance, not the suspension of governance. Built out of people’s own flesh and blood, a crowd enables them, even when they have lost everything, to create an entity that authority needs to deal with, that it cannot keep ignoring. The crowd thereby effectively interpellates authority and confronts it with a challenge: ‘prove the legitimacy of your power by putting society back in order and us back at home.’ The narrative of a protesting crowd ends, one way or another, with the crowd dissolving and yielding the public square.

The performative effect of the entire exercise is to expose the powerlessness of authority, to show that authority is dependent on the people and its orderly conduct. The greatest mistake any ruler can make, of course, is to deal with this crowd through naked force. The well-known problem with this line of action is that there is no way back. Once authority has shown itself so inept as to need to use violent repression to control the crowd, the fiction of popular rule is suspended. In fact, the idea of governance as such implodes. Why would authorities even engage in government if they are willing and able to physically coerce people into submission? Even demagoguery loses its rationale. The need for any form of consent simply evaporates. A ruler is well-advised to seek other ways of controlling masses. Therefore, when confronted with a crowd authorities desperately want representatives to talk to and demands to negotiate over.

Only then can they hope to keep the performance of legitimate rule going. In highly disciplined societies people may come to expect the scenario of protest to unfold non-violently. Yet, even the efficacy of such pacified protests still depend, I would argue, on the virtual threat of a crowd going wild. Often, however, the play is distilled into a series of coordinated and carefully stylized gestures.

This antagonistic play between governing elites and protesting crowds has a virtually endless variety of manifestations and possible outcomes. What is common to all of them is the way in which they are predicated on a split between state and society. As already noted, the demand that a protesting crowd materially represents derives its force from the threat of peaceful sociality erupting into an unpredictable, lawless, excessive mass. The threat is that the crowd becomes the very antithesis of society, disrupting the normal course of events. It is up to the state to put the crowd back into order, back into what may be properly called society: the familiarity of the home and the productiveness of the economy. Seen in this way, a protesting crowd forms an excessive third space, outside society. What’s more, the occupation of this third space by protesters is deliberately meant to be a transgression. Society has, in one way or another become unbearable. It is now up to the authorities to make society bearable again. Thereby, protesting crowds usually don’t contest the split between state and society. In fact, the efficacy of the entire protest often depends on it. The state-society duality is as much part of emancipatory discourses of protest, through which governance for the public good may be propagated, as it is part of state policing, enforcing the boundaries of society and expelling those that don’t belong. Both state and society may enlarge and proliferate, but the basic distinction is usually maintained.

## At home in public

At this point, we can see more clearly what makes Occupy so engrossing. What is striking about the kind of presence that the various encampments of the Occupy movement embody, is the fact that they do not fit into the established repertoire of emancipatory movements as described above. In

short, their embodied demand is not primarily to be included in the concerns of the state, even though at some moments specific negotiations might take place. Many, including participants within the movement (see in particular Graeber 2011), have suggested that the encampments are self-organizing communities, experimenting with new ways of living together and building a just society from the ground up. Indeed, many of the Occupiers call themselves anarchists. That would explain why Occupy doesn't fit the conventional frame of a protest movement: it's not a protest movement, it's a way of life, namely leaderless social organization. Not only is this understanding of the movement rightly rejected as naive, if it were to become the dominant narrative, it would render the movement toothless. Posturing as a self-sustaining utopia-in-progress only more radically reiterates the split between state and society, but this time by suggesting that there can be society without a state.<sup>2</sup> Either Occupy seeks to interpellate the state, meaning that self-organization is not the point – why else direct your attention to an authority? Or Occupy is self-organizing, meaning it does not seek to interpellate the state. Whoever genuinely thinks that Occupiers are turning their backs on the state and creating a new society in the midst of a failed one, should wonder how that will end. They should seriously consider, for instance, what happens to separatist movements. The charade of making a clean break, of starting anew, can only lead to dead ends. Occupy *is* a protest movement, it *is* interpellating the state. While practices of so-called 'direct democracy'<sup>3</sup>, consensus building, experimentation and self-reliant organizing are certainly going on in the movement and part of the discourses associated with it, I would argue that the *form* of protest has nothing to do with these ideas about what Occupy is all about. The peculiarity of Occupy, I want to argue, consists in *how* the gesture of protest is executed and *what* it is thereby capable of demanding.

In civic protest, all parties seek to re-constitute society, albeit for different, antagonistic reasons. Throughout the tumult a dualism of state and society is maintained. Demands are embodied by an excessive crowd that *isn't supposed to be there* and should be put back in order by a more responsive and responsible state. Occupy's encampments, however, are not exactly *things out of place*. As prolonged settlements, they display definite structure. They aren't really crowds either. Typically, they form impro-

vised villages, complete with general assemblies, libraries, homes, guards, barbers, and courses in global finance. The threat is not that the camps may erupt into lawlessness, although the non-serious press won't stop associating Occupy with disorder. Rather, the threat is that their definite structure may become permanent. Again, I don't think the encampments are actual attempts at post-capitalist life. Rather, they have drawn attention to themselves by completely usurping the regular script of protest: How extraordinary, a protest movement that threatens authority with sustained, *civilized* presence in public space! Occupy isn't just non-violent, it's shockingly civil and homely.<sup>4</sup> Occupy has occupied third space, beyond the duality of state and society, not by forming an excessive mass, but by assembling a civilized camp. It is precisely its civil occupation of this third space that makes Occupy different from the regular and routinized repertoires of most protest movements. Occupy is not a labor movement, it's not a women's movement, it's not a student movement, it's not concerned with an immediately particularizing identity. As its acquired name suggests, it's a movement that is first and foremost about occupying a space.<sup>5</sup> Occupy doesn't expose the state's dependence on the orderly behavior of people, thus interpellating its responsibility to put society in order. Rather, through its particular gesture of protest, the encampment, Occupy normalizes a space outside of state and society. If a protesting crowd *is* the demand 'govern us', the presence of Occupy *is* the demand 'give us a third space'. States have a hard time reacting to this demand as it's not concerned practically with the governance of society. The question is not one of governance, but one of toleration. Will the state tolerate the enduring and normalized presence of a third space, beside the spaces of society and its own? What, by the way, is the state asked to tolerate in this regard?

## Occupying political culture

How can it be that the normalization of a third space has become an act of citizenship (Isin & Nielsen 2008), able to attract a huge amount of attention? Why is the gesture of building a camp such an attractive form of protest? Up to now, I have somewhat agnostically referred to the space cre-

ated by Occupy as a *third space*. But of course, this space has had other names already: the public sphere, the commons, the beautiful Dutch name *middenveld* or, more generically, political culture. All of these names suggest that there is a space between society and the state, connecting and integrating the two, hence the idea that it is a third. They suggest that a state can really only become rational, i.e. democratic, when it takes its cues from an outside space in which particular grievances have been generalized into public demands.

In two extensive articles, first published in 1995 and reprinted in her *Genealogies of Citizenship* (2008), Margaret Somers discusses the historical formation of the concept of *political culture*. Her critical assessment of its genealogy, a round-about of Anglo-American democratic theory including Habermas, helps us to understand why the civilized occupation of a third space might be something that grabs people's attention and unsettles their natural attitude towards the world. Somers comes to the conclusion that the concept of political culture has been caught within a very particular narration of citizenship. In this narrative, political culture can only be the public expression of autonomous, property-owning adults. That is, people must have already grown up and become responsible adults in the private domain, before they can take up citizenship and participate in political culture. The consequence of this narrative is that the concept of political culture is irredeemably collapsed into the private side of society, i.e. the family and the economy. The concept is part of a broader ideational regime in which families and markets are prescribed to be more natural and real than political culture, which means that true political culture can only emanate from them. At its core, this liberal narration of citizenship prescribes that one is a natural, naked, cultureless man first – a bearer of Lockean natural rights – only after which one's natural freedom becomes entangled in the strictures of politics and culture.

Political culture is thereby really just the name given to legitimate sociality, namely the culture of virtuous, productive men. Thus, the paradox of the concept is that it should mediate between society and the state but inevitably falls to one side of the public/private distinction and loses its mediating, democratizing function. What seems like a third space

through which demands become public and publicized is really only allowed to be an extension of legitimate, naturalized society. It is already prescribed in the concept of political culture that everything that goes on in it affirms and naturalizes society. And so it goes in almost all forms of public protest: 'govern us!', the crowd demands.

My argument is that Occupy has, somewhat unintentionally, gotten entangled in a different narration of citizenship, one that doesn't affirm and naturalize society, doesn't demand societal re-integration, and doesn't end in making society whole again (see also Dean 2011). I want to speculate about why the occupation of squares in the form of civilized camps enacts a third space particularly well. The civilized encampments of Occupy may be attractive, because they take up a third space *as if* it is first. To reiterate, I don't believe Occupiers are building society anew. They are, however, *at home* in the squares and streets. Through the particular form of their protest, they are able to raise a captivating question: Why would all claims, in the end, feed back to the presumed, first space of society? Why would any political culture, worthy of the name, have to collapse back into society proper? Why would the point of participation in political culture only be the mediation of society and the state? Occupy not only addresses the limits of the liberal narration of citizenship, but more importantly, it is acting out a different story about what citizens might demand of the state. By making public space their home, Occupiers are able to evoke the possibility that citizens might actually possess their own space and that the state is neither justified in, nor capable of, frustrating their embeddedness in this space. By more or less violently removing the protesters the state is not displaying its dependence on orderly conduct. Rather, what becomes evident is the state's dependence on the illusion that citizens are firstly part of private society, that *first* there are families and markets and that citizens grow up in them only afterwards. What if citizens can exist, even thrive, without private society? What if family life and marketized labor are just some activities that citizens entertain in their free time, when they are not busy with the primary occupation: political culture? Why would public demands only be made for the sake of protecting families and worker's rights? Occupy is effectively showing that the state must not only be responsive to suffering and injustice, but that it is also responsible for the autonomy of political culture. In this alternate

story about where democracy comes from and where it is going, the people do not emerge from their homes to, temporarily and excessively, occupy the streets. In this story, the people were always already at home in public and it is *this* people – Arendt's demos – upon which legitimate rule is based. The 'third' domain of political culture – the axiom that it is third has become questionable now – is a space of belonging in the same sense as the familial home is. It can now be better understood why the marketization and privatization of the public sphere is the core concern associated with Occupy. The financial corruption of the political process and the government-led privatization of public wealth form the core substantive concerns articulated by Occupy. My argument has been that these concerns are now gaining attention and recognition because they are expressed through a form of protest that prioritizes life in public, enacts the public sphere as a sphere of belonging, and reclaims political culture.

Does Occupy travel?

Finally, we may wonder if the dramaturgical understanding of Occupy developed here doesn't suggest that its efficacy depends on the specific narratives it is confronting. If the hegemony of Somer's Anglo-American liberal citizenship story explains why Occupy evokes an opening onto another path to democratization, the absence of such hegemony should lead to a different dynamic. In what remains I want to argue that this is precisely the case. Occupy has taken hold most forcefully in the US. There, the idea of building a home in public works its heretical magic most effectively. When we contrast this to the effectiveness of Occupy encampments in the Netherlands, we see a striking difference. To be sure, Occupiers in the Netherlands did successfully draw attention to themselves and were able to add considerably to the attention given to the 'crisis' in the Eurozone. But the protest narrative centers around a question very different from the Anglo-American one. In the Netherlands, Occupy has begun to stand for the idea that political compromise and consensus-seeking has failed. Occupiers are identified, and often self-identify, as those who reject the endless bartering between left and right, and propose a sustained effort of conflictual struggle. The protest form, although piggybacking on

the notoriety of its American example, adds little in itself to this position. Although the content of their demands, 'stop compromising!', does seem to strike a chord with a variety of publics, the socialist party SP in particular, the gesture of protest hardly interpellates the state other than in the form of practical concerns: how long will they be staying, should public toilet facilities be installed, who will pay for that?

The liberal narration of citizenship has been on the rise in the Netherlands, but it is in no way hegemonic. Rather, Dutch discourses of citizenship can best be understood as a surprising mix of conservatism and republican liberalism (De Haan 1993; Schinkel & Van Houdt 2010). Although mixed, this narrative is far from unstable. In it, qualified representatives voice claims on behalf of well-organized and visible social groups, taking care of their interests and concerns. Everything revolves around gestures of paternalism towards constituents and accommodation towards others. Republican liberalism became entangled in this narrative after WW II, but never as a challenge to the paternalist status quo. Republican liberalism 'merely' acts as a politico-cultural world view of one of the social groups, namely the moral majority, increasingly claiming precedence over a carefully crafted equilibrium. To be sure, this complex narration of citizenship also naturalizes society and collapses public demands back into society. Here too, a duality of state and society is prescribed. Society, however, is not composed of families and markets, but of ideational communities expressing themselves parliamentarily. The idea that families and markets are what really matter is considered as one of many, albeit ascending, world views. What Occupy is able to do in this context is to suggest that the parliamentary process is defunct and consensus-seeking is stifling the expression of silenced grievances. But building an encampment has no internal relation to this contention. Building a home in public is, in this context, not a specifically heretical gesture. In fact, the idea that politics consists of social groups visibly claiming their place and voice within the plurality of groups, places and voices is nothing less than Dutch doxa. The encampment in public space hardly disrupts the prevailing citizenship story, in fact it might even fit quite comfortably with its established grooves.

In line with this assessment, we see two kinds of critical reactions to Occupy in the Netherlands, apart from altogether dismissive ridicule. First, it is questioned whether Occupy really represents a larger constituency. Apparently, it is expected to fall into the familiar repertoire of paternalist representation. Second, its conflictual strategy is questioned: will it help to form effective solutions to the problems-at-hand? This also shows how Occupy's presence indeed calls forth the dilemma between consensual, parliamentary and conflictual, activist politics. Because Occupy's protest form doesn't disrupt hegemonic expectations about what citizens might demand and what democratic politics might look like, it has not been able to create more than a heightened awareness that the resolution of the Eurozone crisis will need popular support – itself not nothing, of course.

This assessment of Occupy's diffusion to the Netherlands leads to two different, yet complementary conclusions. First, citizens in the Netherlands at least have what American Occupiers want: a measure of democracy. More specifically, Dutch citizens at least know themselves and others through a narration of citizenship which doesn't naturalize society into nothing more than families and markets. In this sense, there is something to be said for representationist paternalism: at least it routinely names and mobilizes social movements that are more than the sum of family and market relations. The second conclusion, however, is that the Dutch narration of citizenship seems immune to heretical gestures of protest. That is, it seems very hard to jolt this narration out of its familiar groove, very hard to come up with a form of protest that does not naturalize society and to demand what American Occupiers are able to demand: the toleration and protection of a politico-cultural space specific to citizenship. As research into citizenship practices in the Netherlands routinely shows, citizenship is not primarily, and almost never extensively, about involvement in political culture (Van Gunsteren 2008; Hurenkamp & Tonkens 2011; Dekker & De Hart 2005; Schinkel 2010). Practices of citizenship consist first and foremost of moral cohesion, duty to the community, and local solidarity.

What Occupy in the US is still able to contest – liberalism's attack on civic dignity – may be very hard to enact in the Netherlands, where protests against the erosion of civic dignity easily become assimilated to representa-

tionist politics. In this way, concerns about the dismantlement of citizenship rights – i.e. the gradual process through which unconditional rights are being transformed into conditional privileges – inevitably become grievances of particular social movements – 'leftists' – trying to mobilize popular support for a particular, ideological position. It is very hard to display and contest, in the form of public protest, the consequences of dismantlement as a threat to civic belonging as such, without immediately becoming the representatives of a particular constituency. Even more worrying than the intractability of Dutch narrations of citizenship is the fact that the demand for political culture may to a large extent already be occupied by those who claim to speak for *Dutch* culture. In these discourses the demand for political culture takes on a nationalist logic in which civic and national belonging are homogenized. Although often ostensibly inclusivist, these discourses only allow civic belonging where there is national loyalty. In this way, political culture is once again stripped of its politics *and* its culture. The fight over political culture may therefore be a much more worrying phenomenon in the Netherlands than it is in the Anglo-American world. In the Netherlands, we should find ways to side-step the intractable self-evidence that all politics is representational and paternalist. Especially when serious discussion is directed to representing and protecting the nation as such.

So without further ado: Occupy everything!

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<sup>2</sup> Without going into a semantic discussion of what does and does not count as statehood, most crucial is the question of whether people, in whatever form of social life, will be subject to violence. If we agree that all social life is violent, we can agree that all social life involves a regulation and exercise of such violence and thereby involves statehood.

<sup>3</sup> A strange concept as a form of governance is democratic precisely insofar as it is indirect.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that there is no violence involved in the protests, but violence is almost never the form of protest. In fact, the form of protest is ostensibly opposite to a threat of



violence.

<sup>5</sup> This idea of what Occupy is should not be understood in opposition to the recent occupations of ports. This form of occupation is clearly different from the one discussed here. The occupation of ports is about obstruction, which the occupation of a third space is not. But that does not entail that the occupation of the ports are necessarily detrimental to the movement as such.

<sup>6</sup> This wonderful word directly translates to 'middle field' evoking the image of an open space, a polder perhaps, between the vested institutions of the state, the market and the family. Most often used in Christian democratic discourses, it serves to highlight the importance of societal integration and moral cohesion.