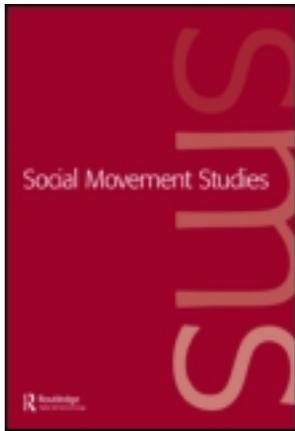


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Why Does Occupy Matter?

Jenny Pickerill^a & John Krinsky^b

^a Department of Geography, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK

^b Department of Political Science, The City College of New York, New York, NY, USA

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Why Does Occupy Matter?

JENNY PICKERILL* & JOHN KRINSKY**

*Department of Geography, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK, **Department of Political Science, The City College of New York, New York, NY, USA

ABSTRACT *Analysing the Occupy movement is important for understanding the political importance of social movements and the theoretical limits of social movement approaches. Occupy enables us to critically re-examine and question what we think we know about the processes of collective action. We identify eight contentions which illustrate why Occupy matters to scholars and which challenge us to re-examine existing assumptions: (1) the core claim to space that Occupy asserts; (2) the power of the language of occupation; (3) the need to pay more attention to the importance of crafting and repeating slogans; (4) the politics of prefiguring a new society (and its contradictions); (5) the implications of not making demands on the state; (6) the importance of ritualising and institutionalising protest; (7) the messy diffusion and mediation of a potentially global movement and finally (8) why confrontation with the police is understood as important as a movement tactic. Whatever the outcome, Occupy has enthused and mobilised activists in new ways and has articulated that inequality is something we all can, and should, seek to remedy.*

KEY WORDS: Occupy, collective action, inequality, London, capitalism, public space

Introduction

As Occupy activists are once more arrested trying to start another camp outside the London Stock Exchange and others concede to eviction notices (May 2012), it is timely to reflect on why the actions of Occupy activists across the world matter. This is especially so, given their comparatively short existence (since September 2011). There are obvious precursors and parallels to the Occupy movement (if it can even be conceived as such a connected entity), but it is not a clear progression from the anti-capitalist actions of the 1990s nor necessarily the spirit of the Arab Spring spreading west. There are disjunctures and fissures between these other movements and moments and the ways in which Occupy was conceived and practised.

To many it was the moment when resistance to the inequalities of capitalism finally emerged: a tipping point in which the unfairness of bank bailouts juxtaposed against rising personal poverty triggered a moment of clarity of the absurdity of the current economic and political system. Yet we have had these moments of clarity before. Indeed, there are those who claim Occupy to be a manifestation of a particular ideology (and therefore its historical tenet) and there is evidence of certain tints of socialism, Marxism and anarchism at different Occupy protests (Graeber, 2011) and indeed similarity with the 17th century

Correspondence Address: Jenny Pickerill, Department of Geography, University of Leicester, Geography, Leicester, UK. Email: j.pickerill@le.ac.uk

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Diggers (Lewycka, 2012). Others rightly have despaired at the ignorance of lessons already learnt about the tyranny of structurelessness or the exclusionary potential of consensus decision-making practices (such as hand gestures).

Yet it would be a shame if academic contributions were confined to a superficial critique of how things could have been done better. Knowing a lot of social movement theory does not make a good activist. Instead we want to reflect on why Occupy matters for those of us interested in social movements, and in doing so identify the common threads of the papers in this special issue. Analysing Occupy is important for understanding both the political importance of social movements *and* the theoretical limits of social movement approaches. Thus, Occupy enables us to critically re-examine and question what we think we know about the processes of collective action. The papers in this issue variously draw upon specific actions, places or tactics to explore why Occupy matters, and here we identify eight overarching themes which interweave and tie together these different narratives.

Eight Reasons Why Occupy Matters

So why does Occupy matter? It was a convergence of interesting tactics and ideas, few of which were novel on their own, but which when combined ignited a passion and energised activism unlike we have seen for several years. It has also enthused academics worldwide who have in turn been advocates of, and participants in, numerous Occupy protests. It is not surprising that the mainstream media, hungry for stories of conflict and struggle, amplified the protests, but what is of real interest in the story of Occupy, and thus why it matters, are some of the tactical and strategic approaches taken.

Making Space

Occupy puts the issue of space at the core of its agenda: by using spatial strategies of disruption (marching and camping in unpermitted places); by articulating the symbolic significance of particular spaces and by challenging the privatisation of our cities, and thus its reinvigoration of the 'right to the city' debates. In London, for example, the failed attempt to occupy space within the square mile of the City facilitated a public realisation that the financial corporate world was not only off-limits to most, economically and socially, but also quite literally.

Physical encampments have long been a protest tactic (at military bases, to prevent road construction, etc.) and actions such as *Reclaim the Streets* in the 1990s sought to reclaim roads (and motorways) for pedestrian use. The act of extended encampments in assertively public spaces (such as city squares or parks) also draws upon the Latin American tradition of public assembly and collective action far more than evidenced in recent years in London or New York. Factory occupations are also a key historical precedent. As in Occupy, the occupations were similarly strategic and symbolic; occupations of factories disrupt production (as some contemporary occupations have sought to disrupt commerce and the 'normal' flow of urban accumulation) and they showed that workers want to work, but under different conditions.

Thus, Occupy camps reasserted the spatial dimensions of exclusion and inequality by forcing society to recognise that capitalist accumulation happens in certain places, and that these places can be named, located and objected to. These encampments have thus reasserted the power of the tactic to camp, and the power of such encampments to identify

the geography of capitalism. Moreover, this focus on space challenges social movement studies to move beyond merely conceptualising the extent of space or the compression of space by time (as with discussions of globalisation and ‘scaling up’ protest), and instead to more thoroughly explore the strategic use and occupation of space as symbolic.

The Language of Occupation

The use of the terms ‘occupy’ and ‘occupation’ by activists turned politics on its head. Occupation used to refer to a state’s forced occupation of another country (such as the USA of Iraq), an act which campaigners sought to overturn and resist. Activists called their acts ‘sit-ins’ (if temporary) or ‘protest camps’ (if long term). Occupy is an altogether more powerful word because it forces the acknowledgement of two things. First, in order to occupy a space it must already be owned. As the British argued in Australia in 1788, if the land has no people (and thus no owners) then it is not an occupation but the claiming of available space and resources. This was, in part, the point of Occupy—to identify the need to reclaim space from corporate greed—but activists also quickly discovered that even a park or square is rarely ‘public’ but is governed by many laws and exclusions. Second, it (perhaps inadvertently) reminded those indigenous people already dispossessed from that land (especially in the USA and Canada) that they were still dispossessed, and gave the impression to some that they were being reoccupied by yet more unwanted intruders (Yee, 2011). As such, ‘to occupy’ had a stronger and more controversial implication than simply to set up a camp or hold a sit-in. This use of powerful language was a tactical choice which framed the movement in a certain way, both positively and negatively, and as such reasserts the debate about ways in which collective action is framed.

Crafting and Repeating Slogans

The slogan ‘we are the 99 per cent’ (whether accurate or not) was incredibly powerful. Unlike ‘this is what democracy looks like’ (from the anti-capitalist protests of the 1990s) or ‘Bring our troops home’ (anti-war protests in the mid-2000s), it immediately created a sense of inclusion and majority.

The power of a good campaign slogan is well known but hard to get right, and tends to be underrated in social movement studies. In the last century, only a few have stood the test of time. The early slogan of the suffragettes of ‘Deeds not words’, the Situationists’ ‘All power to the imagination!’ from 1968, ‘Make love not war’ against the war in Vietnam, or, finally, ‘Think global, act local’ by environmentalists, all bear repeating. The Occupy slogan is likely to resonate as much as these and was key to the success of the movement. It is exactly through this repetition that slogans come to populate the discourse and establish their own truths.

We need to examine slogans more carefully. Slogans differ from other concepts in studies of social movement claim-making: they are not frames (though they partly serve this function, they are also usually a lot more ambiguous); and they are not narratives. Rather they raise questions about the uses of ambiguity in political claim-making, and the way in which, as Stone (2003) writes, ‘ambiguity is the glue of politics. It allows people to agree on laws and policies because they can read different meanings into the words’. However, this ambiguity also creates space for contestation. While focusing on wealth as a defining difference has its drawbacks (in that there are wealthy Occupy supporters and

not all bankers earn enough to qualify as part of the 1 per cent), the notion of a majority 'us' and minority 'them' was a very powerful emotional motivator, but equally enabled opponents to contest the way in which the movement works based on this common super-majoritarian slogan.

Prefiguring a New Society (and Its Contradictions)

Occupy throws the work of prefigurative politics into stark relief, and challenges us to evaluate critically the balance of effort between living and acting a prefigurative, autonomous politics of mutual aid in 'camps', and working within, even on the edge of, 'normal' movement politics to win tangible reforms and alterations of behaviour in various parts of the state. It raises questions about the actual exclusions from the prefigured community and why they occur. Finally, it raises the political question of whether it is possible or even desirable to align the contemporary anarchist politics that are centrally identified with Occupy with existing labour and community organising and campaigning.

As in many other forms of activism, inclusion of diversity in Occupy actions became a point of contention. By focusing on difference according to wealth, it was perhaps assumed that other differences such as race, gender, class and colonial (and other) could be subsumed and to some extent ignored, or because such exclusions are still not uniformly seen as automatically problematic by some contemporary activists. Moreover, it might have been assumed that the multicultural nature of many of the cities in which Occupy emerged would in turn generate multicultural participation. Unfortunately, this was not to be. Despite often being physically close to different ethnic communities (such as Chinatown in New York), or being in cities where the majority of residents were non-white (such as Oakland, California) there have been accusations of racism and exclusion within Occupy. All exclusion is problematic, but Occupy actions encountered three particular issues with regard to unions, gender and homelessness.

Collaboration with labour unions and thus working people was often sought by Occupy. It was recognised that unions could be key allies and that they shared similar grievances to Occupy activists. However, forging such collaborations was difficult and only a few places succeeded. Most notably Occupy Oakland built successful ties with one of the strongest trade unions (the International Longshoreman and Warehouse Union) and together they organised a large general strike and an action which closed several west coast ports (Healey, 2012). As successful as this was, however, the alliance eventually broke down through disagreements around tactics, the need for leadership and which campaign issues should take priority. Moreover, such collaborations raise the quandary of how some prefigurative autonomism actually depended on outside labour support even if this was not always formally acknowledged (such as the financial support of organised labour in the USA for Occupy, or even the assignment of labour and community organisers to Occupy Wall Street by existing community organisations and labour unions).

While it is difficult to generalise across all the different Occupy camps which took place, it appears that feminism and its assertion of respect for different genders have yet to be taken seriously. Women's visible presence is not the same as functioning equality and there were worrying reports of sexual harassment and intimidation making females feel unsafe and unwelcome in camps. Many places established 'safe spaces' in which to protect women, but in a movement focused on tackling economic equality it would seem reasonable that social and gender equality should be at the forefront of debates.

Finally, the fact that in many instances homeless people were already present in the spaces where Occupy set up camps has triggered extensive debates as to how inclusive the movement has been to those already living in the streets. Many camps welcomed all participants but others, like in El Paso, Texas, developed rigorous codes of conduct which homeless people had to abide by in order to be allowed to stay with the occupiers or share the donated provisions. This has raised obvious questions about elitism and assumptions being made about homelessness.

The political and theoretical outcomes of these exclusions have yet to be fully understood, but are likely to have further implications. For example, the refusal of union support by the *indignados* in Spain and the rejection of such labour politics ultimately led to a contradictory political outcome in the national election of the conservatives in Spain.

Making Demands on the State

The complexity of practising a prefigurative politics is further complicated by the official, but variable, refusal to make 'demands' that could be co-opted by existing political parties or that recognise the legitimacy of the state as an agent capable of or willing to implement policy. Instead many camps explicitly sought to circumvent traditional providers of services and rather than make demands simply create the alternative. By establishing temporary tent communities with kitchens, bathrooms, libraries, first-aid posts, information centres, sleeping areas and educational space, they recreated new spaces of provision: prefigurative alternative communities with very few resources. These encampments began with a distinct focus on outreach work. In particular, there was significant emphasis on alternative education. In London, the 'Tent City University' and 'The Bank of Ideas' were quickly established and teach-ins occurred in many camps.

At the same time, it quickly became clear that Occupy camps were developing what Laurie Penny called an 'economy of care, a network of mutual aid' (2012, p. 27) for their residents. The camps began to take on elements of service provision for all involved which extended beyond mere food provision to dealing with mental health issues, temporary housing and in some cases alternative employment in return for a share of the food. While such organisation is a credit to the importance of voluntarism and the possibility of alternative ways of living, it created further dilemmas for participants. There was concern by some that they were in effect replacing (or creating anew) resources that the state should be providing, especially for the homeless or those with mental health or drug use issues. Dealing with such issues, and the personal tensions of living in protest conditions together, eventually led to many camps focusing more on the politics of camp life rather than the politics of the action itself.

This refusal of public policy and engagement with the state raises two important issues for social movement studies: it suggests that we have to do more in theorising the role of the state vis-a-vis movements; and that we need to develop better distinctions among types of movements based on their (often-fluid) interaction with the state and involvements with it. Thus, this rejection of making demands on the state raises theoretical questions such as: is the state reducible to its core coercive functions? does it make sense to institutionally disaggregate the state into agencies with which movements are likely to make headway (at least at times) and ones they are not? what is the role of political parties in state organisations and in movements, and how does variation of this role contribute to very different political choices facing Occupy (and other) activists? and what explains the

current tendency of state actors to throw popular legitimacy to the winds as an important element of wielding power in favour of coercion and repression? Ultimately, can we really speak about movements as fully autonomous from the state, and under what conditions does this make sense?

Ritualising and Institutionalising Protest

All of these earlier issues also raise another important question about the role of ritual in social movements, as well as the institutionalisation of movements. Typically, movement rituals are credited with the ability to raise the energy level of activists and their commitments. But while that may be, and slogans play a real role in this as ritual depends on repetition, there is also a sense in which ritual can be exclusive and define a subset of a movement against others or become ‘mere’ ritual that may be devoid of effective political content beyond its performance.

Thus, the question of police–protester interaction may be critically scrutinised. Does the repetition of almost ritualised interactions help or harm the growth, reach, or effectiveness of the movement, and how? Similarly, one can think about the institutionalisation of Occupy in spite of itself as these interactions both repeat themselves and take up increasing amounts of the movement’s energy. In social movement studies, we need to develop our understanding of ritual, acknowledging that it can be demobilising as well as mobilising, especially as the movement now confronts how it will ‘come back’ into popular consciousness and discourse.

Diffusion and Mediation

Depending on one’s starting point Occupy can be conceived as a global movement (inspired by the Arab Spring) or as a North American concept which was copied across Europe (particularly in Britain) and onto South Africa, Argentina, Australia and Japan (to name just a few). Other occupations took place prior to Occupy Wall Street (the *Indignados* and 15M in Spain) or simultaneously (Tent protests in Israel). In Britain, there were student occupations of University buildings against student fee rises from 2010 onwards. These actions variously had similar tactics, goals or language to the Occupy movement, but were also rooted in their local circumstance and politics.

The point at which a movement becomes truly global is of course hard to discern. Occupy can be celebrated for its international reach, but that does not mean it was a global movement *per se*. Certain choices in tactics and strategy are deeply rooted in the Anglo activist approach and some of this did not easily translate to other countries, such as Italy. The relationship and necessity for such movements to become global need further investigation and academics are beginning to analyse the links and disconnects between the movements in different countries. However, questions remain as to how international solidarity can be usefully practised across such vast distances (Kennedy, 2011).

Crucial to Occupy’s globality was its Internet-based diffusion. Like most collective action in recent years, Occupy was highly mediated through a range of online forums, social networks and open-source software and practices. Facebook, Blogs and Twitter were extensively used and many Occupy camps were extremely media savvy. Such use of online media has become integral to contemporary protest. It is an easy way to connect hundreds of thousands of supporters and share millions of posts. In many ways, this open source or

'free culture, free commons' networking approach mirrors the non-hierarchical organisational structure of the Occupy movement. It has, of course, enabled a large audience to register support without physically joining a camp, and for ideas and strategies to be shared more easily. However, Occupy was mediated through a mix of 'old' and 'new' methods of diffusion. It worked with electronic media, and also through interpersonal ties and existing alliances.

This mix both helped Occupy grow and garner attention, but also set certain limits around the movement—both in terms of the translatability of tactics from one setting to another, and in the continued salience of more proximate, local problems as the focus of movement grievances. Occupy will doubtless be celebrated as a product of an online age of 24/7 interaction and rampant social networks, but there remains an interesting tension between the utility of online social networks for protest and the place-based utility of personal ties. For social movement studies, there is still a need to move beyond the superficial celebration of digital mediation and unpack the (particularly scalar) implications of this use of mixed media.

The Politics of Policing

Finally, the law enforcement response to many of the Occupy actions has been harsh and accusations of unnecessary repression abound (Calhoun, 2011). In Oakland, police were involved in a near fatal assault on activist Scott Olsen (October 2011). Most camps were cleared on the pretext of health and safety or the need to maintain 'public order'. However, there has been an increasing securitisation of society in the last decade and an ongoing erosion of the right to dissent for much longer.

This politics of policing, especially in the collusion between financial interests and the repression of dissent, was made evident by the response to Occupy. Although there is a growing literature in social movement studies on protest policing (e.g. della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Earl & Soule, 2006), there are three elements about Occupy which are still pertinent. Occupy has illustrated the extent to which protest policing has evolved, the ways in which policing tactics have diffused across countries and the very act of confronting the police has a central place in what could be called the 'Occupy' repertoire. This, in turn, raises theoretical and political questions about why confrontation with the police is understood as important as a movement tactic (and for what), and its overall effects on movement recruitment, retention and political vision.

Where Next?

While Occupy is beginning to morph in new and interesting directions (such as Occupy Congress and Occupy Our Homes in the USA), there remain challenges to its approach. Feminism needs to be taken seriously and not confined to 'women's issues' or perceived to be solved by creating 'safe spaces'. Homelessness has also been recognised as a complex situation, and for all concerned structural dispossession still requires more creative solutions. Others have argued that the aims of Occupy can be extended further, in particular to environmental debates. Athanasiou (2011) argues that the inequality that Occupy identifies does not just result in economic poverty but also environmental crisis. Inequality leads to insecurity which leads to an inability to deal with climate change.

Thus, the Occupy movement carries on in new forms and new directions. This continuous reinvention and diversity of approaches and tactics is why Occupy matters. It is not a simple movement, not a single issue, but instead embodies the frustration and energy that many of us have with the way society is organised. Whatever its final outcome Occupy will have seeped into the consciousness of many and assertively articulated that inequality is something we can all seek to remedy.

Concluding Remarks

This special edition is an attempt to map the diversity of both the location of actions across the world and the issues which they have faced and raised. We are not alone in recognising the need to reflect from both within and without the movement. In addition to the already extensive discussion by participants (such as in the *Occupied Times*), there is growing academic analysis of events. Notable others include books (Gessen *et al.*, 2011; Byrne, 2012; Gitlin, 2012; Van Gelder, 2012; Writers for the 99 per cent, 2012; Chomsky, 2012), journal interventions (*Society & Space*, 2012; *American Ethnologist*, 2012, vol. 39, issue 2) and the excellent forum collated by the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* (2012). We hope that this collection adds to these debates and we provide them free here in the spirit of the movement itself.

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Jenny Pickerill is a Reader in Environmental Geography at Leicester University and author of *Cyberprotest: Environmental Activism Online*, and *Anti-War Activism: New Media and Protest in the Information Age* (with Kevin Gillan and Frank Webster). She has published on autonomous, anarchist and indigenous activism, the emotional spaces of collective action and online tactics. She has a particular interest in environmental protest camps and occupations: having worked with anti-roads camps in Britain, forest blockades in Australia and various squats and self-built eco-communities. She is a co-editor of *Social Movement Studies*.

John Krinsky is an Associate Professor of Political Science at The City College of New York (CUNY) and author of *Free Labor: Workfare and the Contested Language of Neoliberalism* and is a co-editor of, and contributor to, a forthcoming collection *Marxism and Social Movements*. He has published on welfare rights and labour organising in New York City, and on a number of aspects of social movement strategy, learning and culture, and on public sector labour activism in the USA. He is currently working on a book on the transformation of public sector work, and on a new project on the articulation of *Occupy* and existing labour and community organising in New York City. He is a co-editor of *Social Movement Studies*.