Net, square, everywhere?

Nick Dyer-Witheford

Since hackers led digital systems on a line of flight from their military origins the Internet has had an ambivalent political virtuality. In the mid-1990s the emergence of the anti- or alter-globalization movement coincided with growing access to the Internet, open source software and creative commons production. The digital dissemination of the Zapatista call for resistance to neoliberalism galvanized a movement whose summit-busting manifestations, from Seattle to Genoa, included a central role for indie media centres, weaving what Harry Cleaver termed 'an electronic fabric of struggle', circumventing the ideological filters of media capital.[1] But as the tide of alter-globalization ebbed in the wake of 9/11, so too did the cachet of cyber-activism, which in its speedy ephemerality seemed to contribute to the movement's evanescence. And as oppositional energies declined, so rose capital's perennial capacity to recuperate radical new technologies, as subversive network possibilities became the basis of a commodified Web 2.0, fuelled by the free cultural labour and closely surveilled daily digital self-revelation.

Net

The initial explosion of the 'global slump' did not arise from the activities of any cyber-Left, but rather from finance capital's self-destructive inability to handle safely the new means of communication, crystallized as high-speed trading and computerized risk management algorithms.[2] But as the crisis unfolds, it offers another turn of the screw in the helical story of network counter-power. Resistance, slow to emerge, assumed a very different tone from alter-globalization, looking not to the possibility of another world but to the bleakness of no future. Confronting disaster arising from the global fluidity of networked capital, the response was to seize space, hold ground, occupy – a logic that spread from the streets of Greece to US university blockades, French factory seizures and British student occupations, and then abruptly spiked in the Arab Spring.

Occupations depend on bodies filling space. But they also involve communication, in at least two aspects – horizontalist general-assembly decision-making and networked social media: the very slow and the very fast. The role of social media in these uprisings is difficult to discuss because liberal commentators fetishize it so heavily – as if Facebook and Twitter, not unemployment, rising food prices and authoritarianism, were the cause of uprisings in Egypt. This is a backhanded way of vindicating high-tech advanced capital, and one that locks attention on middle-class activists at the expense of workers and the poor. Nonetheless, despite this corrupt analysis, both digital networks (such as Cairo's bloggers) and conventional media with developed digital strategies (such as Al Jazeera) were important to the struggles in and around Tahrir, and to the dynamic by which its example was relayed to the Spanish M15 'Take the Square' movement. What began to emerge was the possibility that social media, built on the expropriation of Net commons, might themselves be subject to reappropriation.

Square

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) has taken this tendency to a new level. The preconditions were provided by a US unemployment rate officially at 9 per cent, in reality close to 16 per cent; grotesque income polarization; widespread evictions; the paralysis of the Obama regime. But the spark was virtual. Or, better, there were sequences of virtual sparks, like a gunpowder trail. The initial Internet call to occupation from the anti-consumerist journal *Adbusters* was relayed through a circuit of left blogs and news sites; the independent, yet intersecting, establishment of the Tumblr micro-blog, 'We are the 99%', where the photo and text testimonials of the victims of the North American economic crisis also attracted a mounting number of hits. The endorsement of the occupation by hacker network Anonymous articulated it to the Wikileaks struggles. On the basis of scores of personal conversations on the first two days of the Occupy Wall Street I would say that the majority of the small group of unemployed, students and precarious cultural media workers that descended on Zuccotti Park, a group that mixed in almost equal numbers veterans of the alter-globalization movement and political neophytes, heard about the event exactly the same way I did: online. And it was also online that the news of the Occupation radiated out. Again, we can schematically chart the waves in this radiation: the relay of the general assembly proceedings from a media centre run from on-site generators to the livefeed site Global Revolution; continued use of social media, Twitter and Facebook but crucially again Tumblr. The posting of the much-referenced 29 September Internet manifesto, 'Declaration of the Occupation of New York City', followed the perpetually provisional user-editable list of proposed demands; and, as the movement spread, the aggregation of news in sites such as occupyeverywhere; more videography to occupyoutube; and fund raising for non-digital

media, such as the *Occupied Wall Street Journal*, by online crowd-sourced fund-raising agencies, such as Kickstarter or LoudSauce.

All this emerged from a vortex that mixed up individual digital users, highly politicized, shoestring-budgeted media collectives, liberal small-scale media capital or would-be capital, and the not-so-small-scale resources of media celebrities – a concoction that explains both the political polyphony of Occupy and its fast escalating virtual presence. Over two weeks this networked irruption tipped the mainstream media response from a vicious circle of silencing dissent to a virtuous circle of movement amplification, a transition marked first by the *New York Times* decision to cover the occupation in depth, and second by the anomalous irruption of critical reporting about police violence against the occupiers on the network news of MSNBC. That Zuccotti Park used to be in the shadow of the Twin Towers occasions multiple ironies, one of which concerns Occupiers' communication strategy. In the aftermath of 9/11 security pundits declared that al-Qaeda had mastered a netwar formula, namely staged a dramatic event, at a global media centre, conveying an unmistakable message and exemplifying an organizational modus operandi that could be relayed to and replicated without central control by numerous franchising groups. And this was pretty much the dynamic unleashed by Occupy, one week after the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Within a month, by 15 October, synchronized occupations and demonstrations proliferated across large and small cities in the USA, Canada and internationally – an extraordinary achievement. Three months previously, it would have been unbelievable that there would be a movement on the streets of a hundred North American cities, occasioning over a thousand arrests, for which polls show substantial public support; with internationalist connections denouncing social inequity, the concentration of wealth and, sometimes, capitalism itself.

Everywhere

Yet Occupy has its limits, limits largely coterminous with its strength. What its networked call summoned is a left populism, spanning reformist and radical politics, anti-corporatist and anti-capitalist positions. It is difficult to generalize about Occupy sites precisely because they are so widespread. Nodes on its network are localized and heterogeneous. Occupy Oakland is very different in racial composition from, say, Occupy Toronto or Occupy Philadelphia. But it is probably fair to say most Occupations will contain, in varying proportions, some mix of class struggle and libertarian anarchisms, New Agers, social democrats, proponents of left (and right) monetary reform schemes, and even Tea Party members. The outrage at capital's inequity and excess is unmistakable, but so too are the difficulties in and struggles over platform and demands. More important, perhaps, is that, for all its ubiquity, the limits of Occupy are the boundaries of the squares, plazas and parks it has seized. These are sites of public assembly, but not sites of production. To the extent Occupy stays within them, it remains a symbolic protest, stopping nothing. It does not interrupt the extraction and circulation of value. Therefore it can be repressively tolerated. The press speculates on whether Occupy can last the winter. But the issue is not maintenance, it is movement – either containment as a waning signifier, slowly deserted by a briefly captured 24/7 media cycle, slipping into the various black holes yawning beneath an alternative urban lifestyle experiment, or expansion outwards.

The crucial vector is the relation of network to workplace. This relation is intrinsic to the protest: occupiers are workers, albeit often unemployed, potential or precarious workers. Their grievances relate to work, wages and worklessness. And there are also organizational connections to workplaces. Too easily overlooked in discussions of digital tactics is that the general assemblies of Occupy Wall Street had been preceded earlier in the summer by those of New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts, a coalition of trade unions and community groups against Mayor Bloomberg's austerity measures. Many of the occupiers were members of this alliance. The official organs of the

American labour movement lay outside the circuits of social media activated by Adbusters and Anonymous; but once the occupiers were on the ground, surrounded and nearly outnumbered by NYPD, this omission was very apparent – labour committees were among the first working groups formed. From the other side, OWS resonated with trade unions in the aftermath of the failed attempt to halt attacks on public-sector workers by occupation of the Wisconsin state legislature, and of a series of strikes and labour disputes in the airline and communications industries.

Entangled with the net-wide media of Occupy is therefore a more occult communications story: that of the interface between anarchist horizontalists in the square and the vertical bureaucratized US labour movement – sclerotic, fractured, defeated, yet not extinct – and with some emergent sectors touched by the same dynamics as Occupy itself. After 17 September action, and before the 15 October day of global action, crucial moments for Occupy Wall Street were the marches between 27 September and 5 October, when occupiers were joined by Communication Workers of America, on strike against communications giant Verizon; the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), protesting the amalgamation of Continental and United airlines; the New York City Transport Workers Union (TWU), which went to court to prevent police from ordering union drivers to bus arrested demonstrators to jail; and other unions of teachers, construction workers and the public sector. Occupiers in turn sallied out to support Teamsters on strike at Sotheby's art auction house. Unions are now among the most significant providers of funds and facilities – such as the medical care provided by Nurses United – for Occupy sites, a crucial connection even if this is sometimes more a matter of 'presents than presence'.

To say that the relation is fraught is an understatement. Anarchist occupiers can rightly suspect the participation of big labour as a force dragging the movement to electoral co-option. Conversely, it is sometimes the more progressive sectors of labour, particularly organizations working with unemployed, immigrant workers and the racialized service sector – organizations that themselves are deploying networked media strategies to connect dispersed workplaces – that are most critical of what they see as Occupy's privileged tactics of urban camping. Recently splits within the labour movement over support for the Keystone XL pipeline spilled into Occupy Wall Street. Nonetheless, the possibility exists of – as Alex Callinicos put it – 'connecting the squares and the strikes'; of Occupy directly or indirectly contributing to a renewal of workplace militancy.[3] The partial one-day general strike in Oakland protesting the injury of an occupier by police is so far the most important, but not the only, example of a dynamic whose outcome will determine the class trajectory of Occupy.

Class

The working class changes historically, both in its technical composition – the division of labour, the use of machinery – and politically, in its degree of subordination or challenge to capital. These changes in class composition occur in cycles of struggle. Capital restructures command by spatial expansion and technological innovation, which undo established forms of working-class power. These changes can, however, also catalyse the emergence of new struggles. The last forty years have seen the decline of the 'mass worker': the factory-based labour force, concentrated in capital's core territories of the planetary north-west, politically organized through trade unions and mass democratic parties. From the 1970s on, a neoliberal offensive decomposed the mass workers' assembly-line bases by robotization, container transportation and electronic communication, relocating industrial production to the periphery, and generating in the core a shift to service and technical work. The result has been a new class composition, the global worker: a collective labour organized not along the assembly line of the factory, but along planet-spanning supply chains; internationalized by the world-scale expansion of

capital; diversified by an increasingly complex division and integration of labour; universalized by the subsumption of women; rendered precarious by a massive world-scale reserve army of the unemployed, especially crucial in the global south, and manifest in the vast reservoir of rural and urban destitution powering the 'economic miracles' of India, China, and perhaps soon Africa; planet-changing in the scale of its activity (think global warming). Digital communications now play as strategic a role in the composition and decomposition of the global worker as the mass media of broadcast radio and television previously did for the mass worker. In this new composition, digitalization touches nearly every aspect of the labour process, but in differentiated ways.

In and around Occupy, various segments of this networked proletariat now swirl in what is, at best, a semi-synchronized choreography: at its core, in the squares, the precarious and unemployed, the students, the intermittent cultural and media workers, sometimes themselves becoming media capital; on its periphery, but expanding its orbit, workers in large-scale transportation and communications industries that circulate global capital; construction workers building world cities that are also communications hubs; public-sector workers, toiling in the infrastructures of what is in North America a substantially post-industrialized economy. Offstage, in this account, and only for the moment, are workers in the new manufacturing zones, doing the heavy lifting for the information economy in the electronics assembly factories of the Pearl river, the e-waste dumps of West Africa, and the coltan, lithium and rare-earth mines spread across the global south. Digital networks both connect and divide this workforce.

This is what makes the slogan 'We are the 99 per cent' simultaneously inspired and mystifying. Networks enable a circulation of struggles. They make the resistances to global capital by various segments of the global worker digitally visible, audible and legible to one another. But they do not spontaneously guarantee the commonality of

these struggles, which must rather be constructed as a project of political articulation. This is the task of communist organization. The important radical formations of the future will be those that bring to this old task a new fusion of networked and terrestrial connection to actualize the aspiration emblazoned on the banner carried at the Oakland general strike: 'Occupy Everywhere: Death to Capitalism'.

Notes

1. Harry Cleaver, 'The Zapatistas and the Electronic Fabric of Struggle', https://webspace.utexas.edu/hcleaver/www/zaps.html, 1995.
2. David McNally, *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance*, PM Press, Oakland CA, 2011.
3. Alex Callinicos, panel discussion at 'Critical Refusals' conference, Pennsylvania State University, Philadelphia, 27 October 2011.

Ideas are bulletproof

Andy Merrifield

With the emergence of the worldwide 'Occupy' movement, at last there seems something we can write home about, something we can celebrate, salute, support. We can even don the mask ourselves, join in, grin that mischievous and devilish Guy Fawkes grin and affirm our own phantom-faced defiance of big money and big business. Behind the disguise, behind that anonymity, demonstrators everywhere have revealed their true identity, and revealed their numbers: 'We are the 99 per cent'. *Indignados* have shown to the world that masses of people share the same sense of frustration and rage: enough is enough. 'V' is for Vengeance.[1]

Like a lot of urbanists, I've also been fascinated by what this means for urban politics. From Tahrir Square to Plaza del Sol, from Syntagma Square to Tottenham's streets, from Zuccotti Park to St Paul's Cathedral, the city has seemingly become the critical zone in which new forms of 'occupational' protest unfold. 'Right to the city' or something else? If something else, what else? The global sway of Wall Street and City of London decision-makers has been called into question, contested, by collective bodies in the public realm; this at a time when an inexorable shift of the human population into urban agglomerations has occurred and when the city region is now viewed as the fundamental unit of economic development and potential environmental collapse. The occupations are politically stimulating, yet theoretically tricky to unravel, especially if one wears an urban cap at the same time as a Guy Fawkes mask.

Towards the end of his life, one of our greatest urbanists, Henri Lefebvre, expressed a desire that urban dweller and citizen embrace one another again in a space that they would collectively invent. (Lefebvre was a chip off the old Marxist bloc(k): 'Are you an anarchist or Marxist?' a perplexed student asked him in the 1970s. 'A Marxist, of course', the septuagenarian prof replied, 'so that one day we can all become anarchists.') In the 1980s, when Lefebvre tried to update his thesis on 'the right to the city', first set out in the late 1960s, he implied it was nothing less than a 'revolutionary conception of citizenship'. Typically, Lefebvre never told us what he meant by this. Yet