Public squares and resistance: the politics of space in the Indignados movement

Puneet Dhaliwal

Abstract

There has recently been growing resistance in response to the current crisis of neo-liberal capitalism, from the Arab uprisings to European mobilizations against austerity measures and the global spread of 'Occupy' movements. Many of these movements make use of the occupation of public space. This paper analyses the strategic value of this practice with reference to the Indignados movement in Spain. First, I offer an outline of the Indignados movement and its 'politics of space' in terms of the occupation of public squares. Second, I explore the potential of this politics of space in three steps: (a) I draw on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space to suggest how occupations may enable the emergence of new social spaces; (b) I emphasize the importance of transforming space as a means of transforming social relations; (c) I then elaborate the way in which the transformation of social relations in such spaces may contribute to the broader contestation of the existing hegemonic social order. Drawing these considerations together, I conclude that the occupation of public space is strategically valuable when it can undergird a sustained transformation of social relations, particularly when this is directed outwards towards transforming other social spaces.

1. Crisis and resistance

> Capital is in its deepest crisis in many years ... Could it be that the crisis is not just a breakdown of capitalism but the breakthrough of another world? Demonstrations all over the world proclaim that the capitalists are the cause of the crisis. And yet ... this cannot be so. We, not the capitalists, are the cause of the crisis. Capital is a relation of subordination, it drives towards the subordination of every aspect of our lives to the logic of capital. If it is in crisis, it is because of our insubordination, because we are saying 'no, no more'. (Holloway 2010, 250).

Social movements across the world are currently expressing this selfsame insubordination, or resistance, to neo-liberal capitalism through mass public demonstrations and the articulation of their own cry of 'no, no more' to the existing social, political, and economic order. The Arab uprisings have resulted in political revolutions ousting President Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Mubarak in Egypt, the eventual overthrow (albeit with foreign intervention) of Gaddafi's government in Libya, and ongoing uprisings in Bahrain, Syria, and Lebanon, amongst other countries. Taking inspiration from these uprisings,

Europe has seen sustained demonstrations against government austerity measures, particularly in Greece and Spain. More recently, there has been a proliferation of 'Occupy' protests, taking their name and inspiration from the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York City that are targeting social and economic inequality and corporate influence in the political system.

This cursory overview of recent mobilizations highlights a sharpening crisis of the contemporary economic and political order and growing resistance being mobilized against it. There is, though, a complex interaction between crisis and resistance such that Holloway's above remarks repay careful reflection. The current crises —economic, political, and social— are, in one sense, certainly a 'breakdown' of the existing order, or what Gramsci termed a 'crisis of hegemony' whereby the perceived legitimacy of the existing order evaporates (Gramsci 1971). This breakdown presents shifting political opportunities for social movements such as weakened governments, divisions within elites, and growing possibilities of political alliances in opposition to the government. These various political opportunities may consequently enable sustained resistance by movements in opposition to the existing order (Tarrow 1998). To assert that '*we* are the cause of the crisis', then, seems to downplay the significance of such political opportunities over which we may have no direct causal control.

Holloway's remarks are, however, useful in directing theoretical attention towards the political agency of active resistance in such crises. Crisis, under this view, can be conceived as an attempted 'breakthrough' of an alternative mode of social organization. This implies a rejection of two distinct understandings of crisis that downplay the role of popular mobilizations in determining the nature of a crisis. First, Holloway rejects the "traditional concept of the crisis as an *opportunity* for revolution", in which a big economic crisis occurs as a moment where revolution becomes possible. This approach conceives crisis as economic crisis, distinct from struggle, rather than itself being struggle. Second, Holloway rejects the view that equates crisis with 'restructuring', whereby crisis is merely 'functional' for the persistence of capitalism through destroying inefficient capitals and imposing discipline on workers. Against these understandings of crisis, Holloway emphasizes the 'essentially open' character of crisis, whereby the restructuring of capital is not presumed since struggle has always played an important role in the contestation of the social relations of capitalism (Holloway 2002, 204). While remaining cognizant of the importance of political opportunities (Tarrow 1998; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), I proceed by focusing on the political agency of active resistance.

2. The politics of space: from Tahrir Square to the Puerta del Sol and Plaça Catalunya

In this paper, I aim to present a theoretical analysis of a key resistance strategy that has characterized many contemporary struggles: the occupation of public space. This paper proceeds in three sections. First, in this section, I highlight the prevalence of the occupation of public squares in contemporary mobilizations,

which often take inspiration from the occupation of Tahrir Square in the Egyptian Revolution. In particular, I focus on the politics of space in the Indignados movement in Spain. Second, I employ Henri Lefebvre's theory of space in order to explore the potential and limitations of the strategy of occupying public space. With reference to the Indignados movement, I outline the role that occupying public space can play in the transformation of social relations, which can contribute to the broader contestation of the existing order. Third, I conclude by offering tentative suggestions as to how the strategy of occupying public space may most effectively be employed by today's social movements.

The most enduring and influential image of recent struggles is perhaps that of the sustained occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo. Tahrir (Freedom) Square served as the focal point of the Egyptian Revolution, with hundreds of thousands of demonstrators assembled at a time. This image, widely broadcast by international media, has inspired many of the current mobilizations in the West. This is evident in the attempt by student activists in the UK to occupy London's Trafalgar Square for 24 hours and turn it into Tahrir Square.[1] More recently, the current wave of 'Occupy' protests has adopted the image of turning various public spaces into a 'Tahrir Square' (Figure 1).

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[1] See Matthew Taylor, "Anti-cuts campaigners plan to turn Trafalgar Square into Tahrir Square", *The Guardian,* 22 March 2011. Online: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/22/anti-cuts-campaigners-trafalgar-square-tahrir (accessed 25 October 2011).
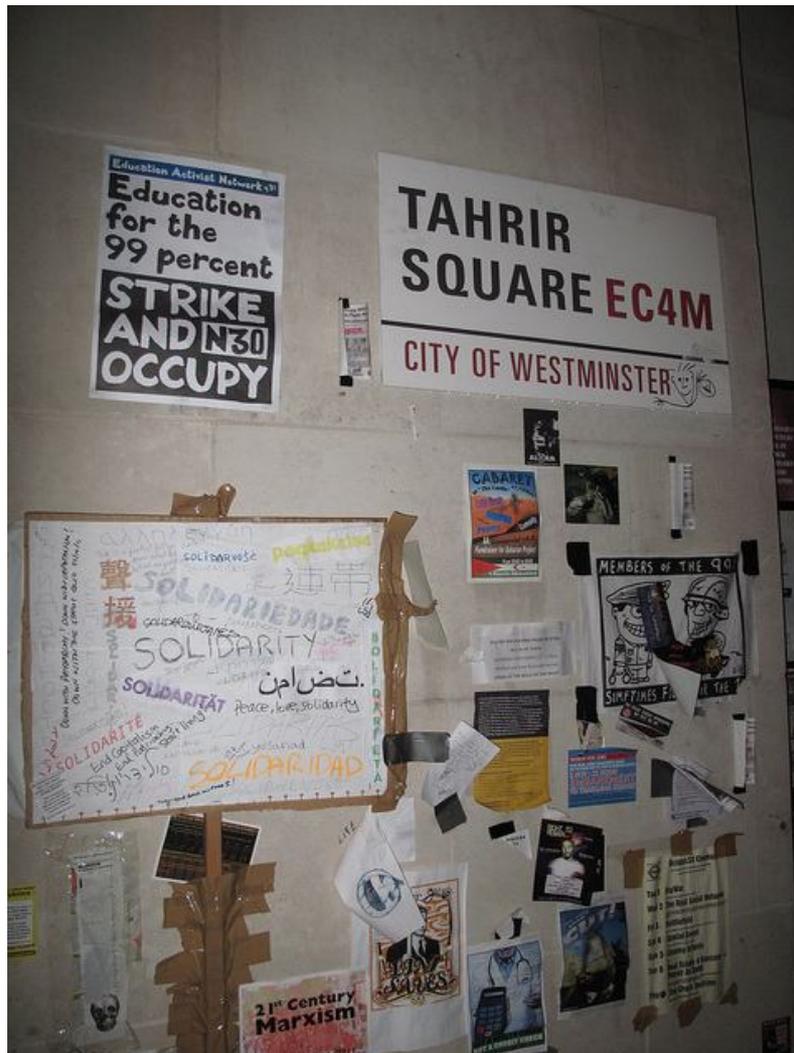
Figure 1: Sign at the Occupy London Stock Exchange protest

Source: http://www.flickr.com/photos/duncan/6310191643/

Author: Duncan Cumming

One of the most notable examples of movements in the West engaging in this 'politics of space' is the Indignados movement in Spain.[2] The Indignados movement is also known as the 15-M Movement, which began on 15 May 2011 with an initial call for action by the unemployed, the poorly paid, the subcontractors, the precariously employed, and young people in over 50 cities across Spain. With 4,910,200 unemployed at the end of March 2011, Spain stands as a country with one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe at

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[2] The term 'indignado/a' is usually translated as 'outraged', but may also be rendered as 'indignant' or 'incensed'.

21.3%.[3] The youth (16-25) unemployment rate of 43.5% is also the highest in Europe.[4] In order to address the economic crisis, the government implemented various economic reforms to revive the economy, including facilitating the hiring and firing of workers and increasing the retirement age from 65 to 67.

In response to the government's policies, Spain saw a general strike on September 29 2010 and continued demonstrations and mobilizations for strikes since. The current wave of demonstrations was called in the run-up to local and regional elections on 22 May 2011 and has been joined by various social networks and 200 small associations. They have brought together a diverse group of people, from the 'ni ni' generation (youths that are 'neither studying nor employed') to angry professionals.[5] This fledgling movement is demanding change to a political system in which the demonstrators feel unrepresented by traditional parties and marginalized by their policies. The desired changes include the elimination of privileges for the political class, increased regulation of the banking industry, a reduction in military spending, more participatory democracy, and measures to combat unemployment, promote housing rights, and improve public services in teaching, health, and public transport (15-M 2011, 13-16).

Very much evoking the spirit of Tahrir, these demonstrations made a call to 'take the square' and resulted in the occupation of public squares, most notably the Puerta del Sol in Madrid and the Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona. The influence of Tahrir is evident from the slogan: 'Tahrir de Madrid = Puerta del Sol de Madrid' (15-M 2011, 145). It must be noted, though, that the occupation of Tahrir Square emerged from the eminently practical concerns of the Egyptian demonstrators following their 'day of rage'. It has long been the site of mass protests before the 2011 revolution, such as the March 2003 demonstration against the Iraq War.[6] It also has the tactical advantages of remaining in the eye of international media and allowing crowds to coalesce for the purpose of self-defence in the face of brutal repression. The idea of Tahrir as a central encampment, held for as long as possible and acting as a hub for the revolution, then, developed organically in this process of struggle. Given the widespread,

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[3] See EITB, "Unemployment in Spain rises sharply to 21.3 percent", 29 April 2011. Online: http://www.eitb.com/en/news/detail/646452/unemployment-spain-rises-sharply-213-percent/ (accessed 25 October 2011).

[4] Juan Oliver, "El desempleo juvenil alcanza en España su mayor tasa en 16 años", *La Voz de Galicia*, 2 April 2011. Online: http://www.lavozdegalicia.es/dinero/2011/04/02/0003_201104G2P26991.htm (accessed 25 October 2011).

[5] Soledad Alcaide, "Movimiento 15-M: los ciudadanos exigen reconstruir la política", *El País*, 17 May 2011. Online: http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2011/05/16/actualidad/1305578500_751064.html (accessed 25 October 2011).

[6] See Menna Taher, "Tahrir Square: Where people make history", *Ahram Online*, 20 January 2012. Online: http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/32175/Egypt/Politics-/Tahrir-Square-Where-people-make-history.aspx (accessed 3 May 2012).

and almost instinctive, employment of this practice in the West, though, it is important to scrutinize its value as a *strategy* of resistance. The aim of this paper is not to pronounce the final word in endorsing or rejecting this strategy. Rather, I aim to draw theoretical reflections that may guide contemporary social movements engaged in such practices.

3. Strategies of resistance: occupying public space

This section draws theoretical reflections from the Indignados movement in order to critically evaluate the potential and limitations of the strategy of occupying public space. There is, of course, nothing to preclude the adoption of complementary strategies to compensate for whatever limitations it might exhibit. This paper, though, focuses on analysing this strategy in itself rather than on how it might intersect with other strategies. This analysis of occupying public space is informed by Henri Lefebvre's theory of space, with a particular emphasis on two aspects: first, his account of the 'trialectics of space', which outlines how space is produced and re-produced; and second, his distinction between the 'abstract space' that exists under capitalism and the 'differential space' that could potentially arise from the occupation of public space. This section proceeds in three steps: (a) I begin by outlining the process by which space is produced and re-produced, emphasizing the possibility of the emergence of new spaces; (b) I then highlight the importance of transforming 'abstract space' into 'differentiated space' in terms of contesting social relations; (c) I end by elaborating the way in which the transformation of social relations may contribute to a broader contestation of the existing hegemonic social order.

(a) The production of space

The Indignados movement, through its occupation of the Puerta del Sol in Madrid and the Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona, has engaged in a 'politics of space', by which public space is taken as the focus of resistance. The importance of public space as a site of resistance is clear when viewed through the lens of Lefebvre's theory of the 'production of space'. Lefebvre argues that social space "is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity" (Lefebvre 1991, 73). That is, space is not a "pre-existing, empty or neutral space, or a space determined solely by geography, climate, [or] anthropology" (Lefebvre 1991, 77). Rather, space is an ongoing production of relations between diverse objects, both natural and social, including the networks that facilitate the exchange of such objects. The Indignados movement's occupations of public space, then, are not simply a seizure and re-organization of physical space, conceived as an instrumental resource for the purposes of mobilization and publicity. They are also interventions in the very process of the production of social space. That is, they are attempts to produce an alternative form of public space to that which currently pervades society.

More specifically, Lefebvre understands the process of the production of space in terms of a 'conceptual triad', or 'trialectics' comprised of three 'spatial moments' that affect each other simultaneously: (i) the first, 'spatial practices' (*l'espace perçu*), refers to space in its *real*, physical form, as it is *perceived* and generated; (ii) the second, 'representations of space' (*l'espace conçu*), refers to space in its *imagined*, mental form, as it is *conceived* and imagined; (iii) the third, 'representational spaces' (*l'espace vécu*), refers to space as it is *lived* and modified over time through its use. This form of space is both *real-and-imagined* (Lefebvre 1991, 33-38). Lefebvre's theory thus entails a significant break from the linear, teleological view of historical change found in traditional Marxist dialectics, in which a third moment would be conceived as a synthesis of two elements of a dialectical relation rather than as an equally significant moment in that relation. This signifies a move towards a "much more fluid, rhythmic understanding" of historical change, in which the production of space is understood in an open-ended, non-teleological manner (Elden 2004, 37). Recalling Holloway's affirmation of the 'essentially open' nature of crisis/resistance, the character of space remains in a constant state of emergence, dependent on the interactions between the three spatial moments.

Applying this 'trialectics of space' to public squares, we can see how the Indignados movement's occupations can contribute to the re-definition of the meaning of social space. Consider first, the representation of public squares — space as it is conceived, designed, and produced by dominant groups and institutions in society. These dominant representations of space are "tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose" (Lefebvre 1991, 33). To make this more concrete, consider the dominant representation of space in Plaça Catalunya, Barcelona. This square is conceived by dominant groups as the city centre — a hub for tourist activity with numerous tourist attractions and commercial outlets nearby. This conception of space contributes to the prevailing representation of Plaça Catalunya that is perceived by the residents of Barcelona. Furthermore, this representation of the square embodies distinctively capitalist relations of production and the social order that arises from those relations. Dominant spatial relations under capitalism are, for Lefebvre, characterized by abstraction. This 'abstract space' signifies homogeneity, hierarchy and social fragmentation (Lefebvre 1991, 52). That is, social life is subordinated to the logic of capital as opposed to being directed towards fulfilling the diverse needs of human community. In Marxian terms, space is conceived so as to maximize its commercial *exchange value* rather than to enhance its *use value* for local communities.

Second, spatial practices perceive the dominant representations of space and generate the modern landscape through the production and reproduction of spatial relations between objects. Found in the signs, codes, and routines of social space, spatial practices can be understood as the glue that holds a social group together, ensuring some degree of cohesion and continuity. In terms of social space, and an individual's relationship to that space, this implies a certain level of 'competence' and 'performance' from that individual in terms of maintaining such cohesion (Lefebvre 1991, 38). For instance, to continue with

the example of Plaça Catalunya, spatial practices may be defined by the daily routine of residents of Barcelona and symbols propagated through advertising and the media that resonate with, and propagate, the dominant representations of that space.

Third, representational spaces are "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols" (Lefebvre 1991, 39). Lived space is informed of representations of space by spatial practices, though it does not necessarily use space in the way it was conceived by the dominant groups or institutions (Garmany 2008). Social agents in lived space may consume space according to spatial practices and representations of space, or they may 'misread' or defy their prescriptions and thus alter the way in which spaces are consumed.

The occupation of Plaça Catalunya by the Indignados movement is an unmistakable example of this. The encampment in Barcelona explicitly rejected the inequalities of the given economic and political system and sought to organize space in resistance to the existing order. Specifically, this involved the establishment of a participatory people's General Assembly in the Plaça. Such lived experiences of social space constitute clear defiance of the dominant representations of space outlined above. As a result, the abovementioned 'abstract space' may give way to a new kind of space. This process occurs through the dissolution of old spatial relations and the generation of new spatial relations. Lefebvre calls this 'differentiated space' to emphasize that the hitherto subordinated differences and peculiarities of human social life may now be accentuated and affirmed (Lefebvre 1991, 52).

Lefebvre contends that these three spatial moments constantly relate to each other in an open-ended process through which space is produced. Social space, then, is not a rigid and static object, but is a set of relations between objects that is constantly in a state of flux (Lefebvre 1991, 83). Lefebvre's theory of spatial production is important, then, in highlighting the possibility of the emergence of new social spaces, and the process by which this may occur. In analysing the occupation of public space, the main issue of concern is the extent to which these spatial relations can be contested and re-articulated for the purpose of altering social spaces. Put differently, we are concerned with the potential scope for lived space to defy 'abstract space' in favour of 'differentiated space'. From this Lefebvrian perspective, the Indignados movement has certainly engaged in practices that may contribute to the emergence of a new 'differentiated' space. This is most notable in the consciousness of those involved in the occupations. The group Abrasad@s de Sol wrote of the occupations:

> "the occupation and liberation of the Puerta del Sol has opened a crack in the wall of the established order, routine and even the domesticated common sense, through which has sifted the spirit of liberty, embodied in the assemblies, commissions and working groups and their horizontal operation based on free discussion of resolutions and rotating delegates, as well as solidarity, real communication and mutual support, in real democracy; in short, we are trying to reinvent and experience as the best and most legitimate means to truly control our destiny, without the dictatorship of money nor the auspices of politicians." (15-M 2011, 25)

The lived space of these squares —experienced as 'liberated spaces'— used public space in opposition to the dominant representations of that space. That is, rather than homogeneous and depoliticized spaces, these squares became sites of mass public deliberation, the politicization of thousands of citizens, and the building of a nascent movement that aims to profoundly transform society. The Abrasad@s de Sol group further described the occupation of the Puerta del Sol as having "freed it from consumerism, from loneliness, and boredom to transform it into a melting pot of experiences and projects and a magnetic furnace where strangers that once walked anywhere alone meet, mix, and melt" (15-M 2011, 27). Underpinning this transformation is a rejection of the subordination of public space to the representations of space, as conceived by dominant groups. Most notably, the development of grassroots participatory democracy in these squares through people's assemblies and committees played a significant role in this process. For instance, protestors in Plaça Catalunya convened to construct proposals, without intermediaries or representatives, and to find solutions to the political and economic problems that they had identified. Of particular note is their proposed 'urban policy':

- That citizen participation is binding and that processes of community self-organization are guaranteed and prioritized.

- Moratorium on the execution of urban plans while these are not guided by the general interest, materialized in effective citizen participation.

- To not construct housing in spaces allocated for facilities, which aggravates the shortages in facilities (15-M-acampadaBCN 2011, 3).

Although the mass occupations have exhibited the potential for the emergence of new spaces, they were not without their limitations. After a month of intense activity in the occupations, the demonstrators in the Puerta del Sol decided on 12 June 2011 to leave the square, dismantling the encampment, packing up tents and libraries, and removing placards from the occupation sites.[7] The demonstrators in Plaça Catalunya also dismantled the encampment, leaving only a minimal infrastructure in the square.[8] Such actions, it must be noted, were combined with strategic actions looking beyond the squares, such as strengthening the grassroots of the movement through neighbourhood

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[7] Miguel Pérez Martín, "Los indignados del movimiento 15-M se levantan bajo el lema "No nos vamos, nos expandimos"", *El País*, 12 June 2011. Online: http://www.elpais.com/articulo/espana/indignados/movimiento/15-M/levantan/lema/nos/vamos/nos/expandimos/elpepuesp/20110612elpepunac_1/Tes (accessed 28 October 2011).

[8] "Los indignados de Plaza Catalunya levantan el acampamento entre hoy y mañana", *El País*, 11 June 2011. Online: http://www.elpais.com/articulo/espana/indignados/Plaza/Catalunya/levantan/campamento/hoy/manana/elpepuesp/20110611elpepunac_1/Tes (accessed 28 October 2011).

assemblies and building for further mobilizations and demonstrations. The dismantling of the encampments, then, should not be immediately regarded as capitulation or a failure of this radical politics of space. Nonetheless, it is clear that a mass occupation of a public square in the centre of large cities like Madrid and Barcelona is difficult to sustain, particularly in the face of police repression. Those demonstrators involved in occupations eventually face conflicting pressures to study, to look after their families, to work, or indeed to seek employment in the first instance. There is, then, a constant threat that dominant spatial relations associated with abstract space may re-assert themselves if the occupation of public space is short-lived.

The importance of longevity in occupying public space can be noted by comparing occupations of public squares with the concept of the 'Temporary Autonomous Zone' (TAZ). Hakim Bey developed the concept of TAZ as a certain kind of "free enclave" that lives a short but intense life (Bey 1991, 99). It is "like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere / elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it" (Bey 1991, 101). As a conception of social change, though, it has been criticized by Richard Day as being "a little too reliant upon what seems to be an ethos of fleeting, individualistic encounters". Consequently, itt seems to offer little more than "temporary respite to a small number of individuals" rather than holding the potential for "broader and deeper social change" (Day 2005, 163-164). The Indignados encampments certainly share some characteristics with the TAZ, particularly their relatively short but intense lifespan and eventual dismantlement that led to this fleeting energy of freedom being dissolved and directed elsewhere. The occupations, however, are certainly much more than this in that they have resulted in the sustained collective organization of demonstrations and the articulation of identifiable proposals and demands. The Indignados are thus certainly involved in *some* kind of sustained engagement with, or rather against, the state. In this sense, the occupations are best understood, not as the practice of a group engaging in TAZ, but in terms of Charles Tilly's conception of social movements. Tilly describes social movements as a "sustained *interaction* between a specific set of authorities and various spokespersons for a given challenge to those authorities ... The broadest sense of the term *social movement* includes all such challenges" (Tilly 1984, 305).

The effective emergence of new space, then, requires the occupation of public space by a sustained social movement, rather than as a TAZ. Despite the limited longevity of the mass occupations themselves, the Indignados movement appears to have effected a notable change in spatial relations with sustained mobilization throughout the summer of 2011, including the occupations of alternative public squares, continuing street demonstrations, and repeated attempts to re-enter the Puerta del Sol. On 19 June 2011, the movement took to the streets in an international day of action against neo-liberal austerity measures being imposed across Europe, with 100,000 marching in Barcelona alone. More recently, the 15th October mobilizations grew from the Indignados

movement, with half a million filling the streets of Madrid and marching towards the Puerta del Sol and a quarter million marching in Barcelona. Thus, while the physical space of the squares is no longer that of the Indignados encampments in May 2011, the social space has been altered through these occupations. The abstract spatial relations of capitalism have been challenged and the potential for a new differentiated space has been experienced.

(b) Contesting social relations

It remains an open question, however, as to how the emergence of new social spaces can be sustained through the practices of movements like the Indignados. How, if the encampments in the Puerta del Sol and Plaça Catalunya last only a matter of weeks or months, can the emergence of new spaces be nourished rather than smothered? The key, for Lefebvre, is the development of new social relations alongside the production of new space. He writes: "'Change life!' Change society!' These precepts mean nothing without the production of an appropriate space. A lesson to be learned from Soviet constructivists of 1920–1930, and from their failure, is that new social relations call for a new space, and vice-versa" (Lefebvre 1991, 59).

This mutually reinforcing connection between social spaces and social relations is an integral aspect of a radical politics of space. First, new social relations require new social spaces, primarily because social space encompasses the very relationships between objects, including social agents. For particular social relations to obtain, then, there must be an appropriate social space in which these relations can be sustained. Second, new social spaces require new social relations because space is not lived or experienced by social agents in isolation. The production of space is an ongoing process that takes place through the intersubjective interaction between social agents embedded in a particular social space. Social agents may, of course, consume or use social space in some instances in a way that is relatively individuated. An indispensable aspect of the consumption of social space by social agents, however, is certainly concerned with how social agents consume social space in connection with other social agents. In this sense, movements concerned with the effective emergence of new social space require a focus on the integral role of social relations in a radical politics of space.

This potential for new social relations has certainly been evident in the practices of the Indignados movement, above all its use of grassroots participatory democracy. Developing as a federation of people's assemblies, this form of participatory democracy is notable for its horizontality and collectivism. People's assemblies have become the main decision-making forum of the movement, both in organizing practical operational tasks and formulating political demands and actions. The Madrid occupation, for instance, was comprised of over 20 commissions, each with its own assembly. These commissions would then report to the General Assembly, the highest decision-

making body in the federation, where the most important political issues of the movement were discussed in mass meetings of hundreds of people.

The egalitarian nature of the occupation was fortified by the use of consensus decision-making in the meetings, characterized by attempts to promote the equal participation of all involved and avoid the emergence of leaders and hierarchy. Many of the assemblies typically employ rotating positions, whereby no singular group or person holds a position indefinitely, since this would run the risk of hierarchies in terms of controlling information, contacts, and certain operational decisions. Additionally, assembly start and end times are typically publicized so that decisions are not simply made by those that are able to stay for the longest period of time.

Key positions include moderators, secretaries, and spokespeople. The moderators facilitates the meeting in terms of focusing discussion on the topic of debate, ensuring that a few individuals do not dominate the discussions, adhering to the agenda, and closing the assembly at the agreed time. The secretary takes minutes on the final decisions reached by consensus: agreement with proposals is signalled by waving hands up in the air, whilst disagreement is indicated by putting them down or forming a cross with one's arms in order to block a proposal. If someone disagrees, they express their arguments for further discussion and their concerns are accommodated in the discussion. In case agreement cannot be reached, each assembly defines a mode of action to break this impasse, such as majority votes. Spokespeople are responsible for serving as the link between commissions and taking the voice from an assembly to the General Assembly to reach common agreements. Spokespeople respect the decisions of their respective assemblies and do not present their own individual proposals as if they were the decision of an assembly. The new social spaces of the occupations have, in many ways, thus enabled the development of corresponding new social relations that tend towards horizontality, egalitarianism, and collectivism as opposed to hierarchy, inequality, and social fragmentation.

There are, of course, well-documented limitations and challenges of such ostensibly 'horizontal' and 'participatory' modes of organization, particularly that of informal hierarchies or the 'tyranny of structurelessness'. Reflecting on her experiences of the attempted horizontal nature of feminist collectives in the 1970s, Jo Freeman argued that self-avowedly horizontal or 'structureless' groups will inevitably come to be characterized by informal power hierarchies. Structurelessness thus becomes a way of masking power in such groups and is advocated most by the most powerful in such groups (Freeman 1972). Movements, like the Indignados, that are engaged in attempts to foster horizontal social relations must certainly engage in critical self-evaluation in order to resist such pernicious tendencies within horizontal groups. The contestation of hierarchical social relations and re-articulation of horizontal social relations, then, is never complete and finalized, but is a constant struggle and negotiation. The development of horizontal social spaces, though, plays an integral role in this process. In a critique of Freeman, Cathy Levine thus wrote:

"Contrary to the belief that lack of up-front structures lead to insidious, invisible structures based on elites, the absence of structures in small mutual trust groups fights elitism on the basic level — the level of personal dynamics" (Levine 2005).

Despite certain challenges and potential limitations, then, the new social spaces that arose through the occupations have facilitated the development of new social relations. In particular, this change in social relations can be observed in the extent to which the movement's politics of space has extended beyond the initial occupations of the Puerta del Sol and Plaça Catalunya. In many ways, a far-reaching radical change in social space and social relations has long been at the core of the Indignados movement's aspirations. In one reflective piece, the 15-M movement wrote:

> "Therefore we must extend the principle of collective liberation that has allowed us to re-appropriate the Sol for all of Madrid, to all its unused spaces and places that the economy spoils and politicians forget. The public squares are to be converted into spaces to do politics without politicians, we have every right to assemble and protest in public squares, since these squares are the people's property. Therefore, just as this has been produced instinctively in the Sol, the squares should be spaces without money, without leaders and merchants, they are the seeds of a new world and the only power that they recognize is that of the assembly of your neighbourhood or town. But that desire for liberation is not in the Sol, because without houses to inhabit or places where we meet, there are no assemblies, nor real democracy, nor new society that is valuable (15-M 2011, 28).

In this vein, the movement has sought to extend its radical politics of space beyond the city centre and into the grassroots of the movement through the establishment of neighbourhood assemblies that are linked to the city's General Assembly (Figure 2).
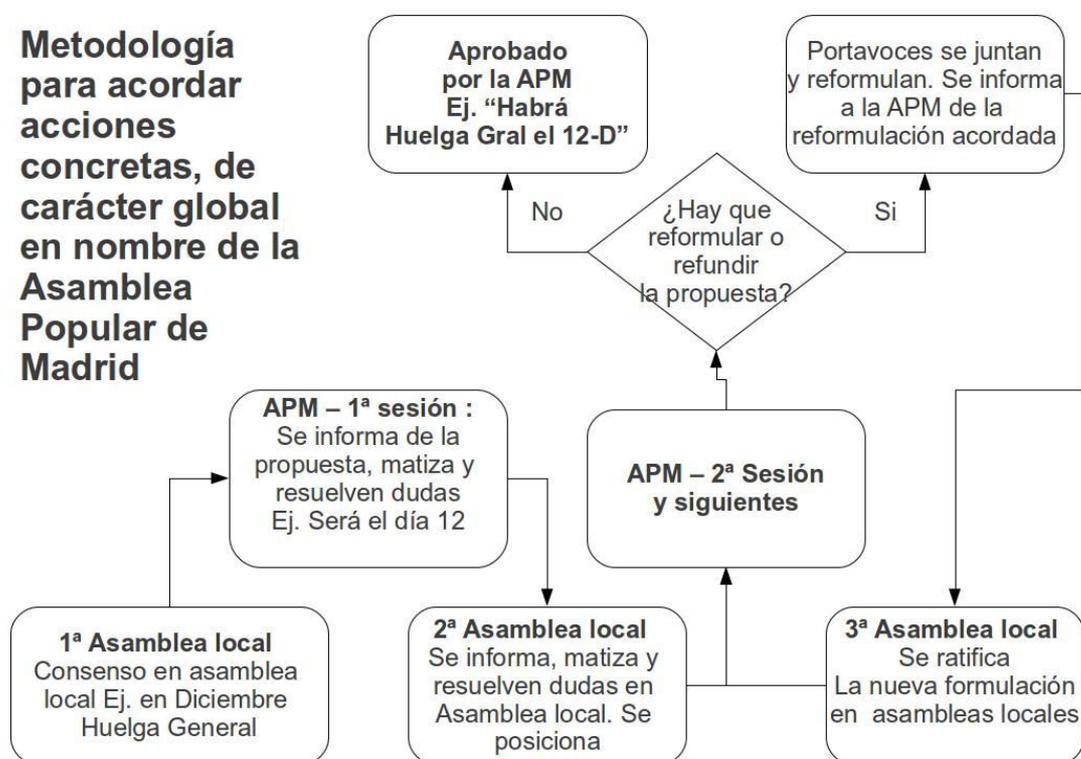
Figure 2: Method to agree concrete actions in the name of the People's Assembly of Madrid, connecting local assemblies to the general assembly.

Source: http://madrid.tomalosbarrios.net/metodologia-asamblearia/

Author: Asamblea Popular de Madrid

In Barcelona, local assemblies are playing an important role in the maintenance of the movement's politics of space through grassroots participatory democracy. This typically involves holding weekly meetings in public spaces to address local problems and issues. For example, local initiatives in the Raval neighbourhood are attempting to reclaim public space from the dictates of dominant representations of such spaces. Their manifesto reads:

> "The imposition of a theme park for tourism, the substitution of the trade of basic products for expensive establishments, large entertainment events, and elitist cultural consumption, have suffocated life and neighbourly living, giving public space to an alien population and to a business network without any roots in the neighbourhood. It is important to recover the ability of local residents to define coexistence, to generate our own places of entertainment, our parties and our meetings places. This includes the restoration of the street as a place of political communication, where light is shed on the conflicts and necessities of the neighbourhood." (15-M-acampadaBCN-Raval 2011).

A key criterion for the effectiveness of this development of new social space and social relations is, of course, a widespread level of involvement by citizens in such practices. Although the Indignados movement has articulated proposals and demands for radical social changes, it is notable for its attempted inclusivity in its 'non-partisan' call-out to all citizens. Their manifesto begins by identifying the movement as composed of normal people with diverse views and perspectives, but united by common experiences:

> "We are normal and common people. We are like you: people who get up in the morning to study, to work, or to look for work, people who have family and friends. People who work hard every day to live and give a better future to those around us. Some of us consider ourselves more progressive, others more conservative. Some believers, others not. Some of us have well-defined ideologies, others consider ourselves apolitical ... But we are all worried and outraged by the political, economic and social landscape that we see around us. By the corruption of politicians, bankers ... By the helplessness of ordinary people. This situation harms us daily. But if we all unite, we can change it. It is time to get moving, time to build a better society between us." (15-M 2011, 7).

This drive towards unity and inclusivity is further emphasized by characterizing the movement as a 'peaceful movement' that "will not organize, encourage, nor tolerate any type of violence, acts of vandalism, racism, homophobia, or xenophobia by any persons, groups, or associations" (15-M 2011, 10). These affirmations of inclusivity are not mere rhetorical flourishes, but sincere principles of operation of the movement, which is evidenced in the level of involvement by citizens in it. Of a national population of approximately 46 million, between 6 and 8.5 million people have been in some way involved in the movement, attending the assemblies or demonstrations that have been called. Of these, between 0.8 and 1.5 million have participated intensely in the movement's initiatives. Furthermore, in a poll conducted in June 2011 by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (Centre for Sociological Investigations), of those that had followed the events relating to the movement, 70.3 % had a 'very positive' or 'quite positive' opinion of it, compared with 12.7% that had a 'very negative' or 'quite negative' opinion of it.[9] The occupations, then, are far from being a marginal engagement by a minority of obstinate activists. The level of involvement in, and support for, the movement highlights its potential for a broader contestation of social relations through its politics of space.

(c) Contesting hegemony

Yet, even if new social spaces can be sustained through the emergence of new social relations, we might wonder if this politics of space can ultimately be

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[9] See Eduardo Romanos, "El 15M y la democracia de los movimientos sociales", *La Vie des Idées,* 18 November 2011, p.6. Online: http://www.booksandideas.net/IMG/pdf/20111118_romanosESP.pdf (accessed 2 May 2012).

effective in contesting the existing hegemonic order and bringing about an alternative social order, as the Indignados movement hopes to do:

> "Community control, the image of the self-organizing mode which frames the Indignados movement and the Barcelona encampment, should become the tool to transform the economic, political, and social system, as it is the only viable way to control the weakness of municipal and parliamentary representatives before the audacity of the elites in power. In addition, community control must be developed to ensure the deployment of self-organization processes in assemblies and commissions, towns and neighbourhoods, as well as places of work and study, as a basis and platform of the future society." (15-M-acampadaBCN 2011, 8).

More precisely, we are concerned with addressing how, if at all, the transformation of abstract space into differentiated space may contribute to the broader transformation of the existing economic, political, and social system. Is the transformation of spatial and social relations through occupations inevitably a transient and rather localized phenomenon? Or perhaps such occupations might develop into what Lefebvre termed a 'counter-space' – alternative spatial arrangements and practices that function as a point of possible *rupture* in the existing system (Lefebvre 1991).

Contesting spatial and social relations is, I suggest, certainly a necessary aspect of radical social change and cannot be neglected from strategic concerns. As João Pedro Stédile, the coordinator of the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement, remarked: "The question of power is not resolved by taking the government palace – that is the easiest thing and has been done many times – but transforming social relations." (Zibechi 2007, 56). This perspective mirrors the distinction between political revolution and social revolution. Whereas a political revolution ('taking the government palace') may replace the government or alter the form of government, the underlying capitalist social relations will remain intact without a social revolution that changes the social, political, and economic foundation of society. A key part of this is the need for social revolution to be *prepared* "in the sense of furthering the evolutionary process, of enlightening the people about the evils of present-day society and convincing them of the desirability and possibility, of the justice and practicability of a social life based on liberty" (Berkman 1929, 200-201). Contesting spatial and social relations, then, plays an important part in preparing such social transformation.

It does not, however, necessarily follow that a politics of space is sufficient for the radical social change towards which the Indignados movement seems to aspire. That is, 'community control' of public spaces might hold limited transformative potential in terms of actually contesting the existing hegemonic order, even if it is a necessary component of broader social transformation. Indeed, in a critical reflection on the movement, one member, Pedro Honrubia-Hurtado, expressed doubts over its revolutionary potential. Despite the obvious objective conditions for social revolt (high unemployment, labour and pension

reform, increasing poverty and evictions), Honrubia-Hurtado notes that the subjective conditions that triggered the mobilizations "are not exactly those of an awakening to bring about a truly revolutionary process". He continues to argue that the mobilizations are

> "more focused on the desire to recover an individual space within the system, without questioning if it is just or unjust, rather than a real consciousness of the need for a shift in the political, social, and economic paradigm that results in a system that is, by definition, unequal, like capitalism, whether in its neo-liberal face or in whatever other version, more or less reformed." (15-M 2011, 84-85).

In this sense, Honrubia-Hurtado sees the movement as merely rebelling against parts of the system without being anti-system; it thus remains "within the limits and approaches of the system" and ultimately "at the service of the system" (15-M 2011, 79). Given the expansive and diverse nature of the movement, there are certainly varying degrees of radical or revolutionary consciousness within it. Honrubia-Hurtado's characterization of the movement as a whole as insufficiently radical, however, lacks foundation, particularly in light of the explicitly anti-capitalist analysis driving the movement in Barcelona:

> "A cry of rage and indignation unites us before the increasing precariousness and deteriorating living conditions in all areas, caused by capitalism, which is no longer capable of resolving its internal contradictions, and also increases its potential for destruction. Our outrage stems not only from the unwillingness of the political class to exercise its function of public service for the people, but its growing submission to the power of banks and speculative capital, favouring monopolies and promoting privatization of public services. The economic crisis accentuates the levels of exclusion and unemployment by the labour reform, cuts, and the worsening of pensions." (15-M-acampadaBCN 2011, 1).

In many ways, Honrubia-Hurtado's critique recalls a dualistic debate that has long divided the radical left: whether radical social change can be achieved through the development of autonomous spaces or whether the focus of revolutionary efforts should be directed towards the state: whether we should pursue power-to vs. power-over (Holloway 2002), or engage in the politics of affinity vs. the politics of hegemony (Day 2005). This critique, I suggest, erroneously posits a false dichotomy between recovering space within the capitalist system and engaging in struggle against the capitalist system. The value of this critique, though, is that it critically scrutinizes the transformative potential of a politics of space —even if anti-capitalist in motivation— that engages in practices to recover 'individual space within the system'. In the language of social relations, the issue at stake is whether the emergence of new spatial and social relations can act as an effective basis for contesting hegemony, or if its effect is consigned to merely converting individual spaces within the system into 'free enclaves' that can have no broader impact.

The Indignados movement's spatial politics, with its focus on developing horizontal social relations through grassroots participatory democracy, is a clear example of 'prefigurative politics', which aims "to develop the seeds of liberation and the new society (prior to and in the process of revolution) through notions of participatory democracy grounded in counter-institutions" and community (Breines 1980, 421). That is, the desired future egalitarian society is 'prefigured' in the horizontal social relations of community control that frames the movement's operation. Movements guided by prefigurative politics do not seek totalizing effects across all aspects of the social order by taking state power; nor do they seek change on selected axes by reforming state power (Day 2005). Although the prefigurative politics of the Indignados movement begins to develop the very substance of social transformation, Honrubia-Hurtado's critique still looms large. Namely, does prefiguration unjustifiably neglect the question of power such that contesting spatial and social relations simply is not sufficient to contest hegemony?

Here it is important to distinguish between two distinct modes of prefiguration: what I call 'closed prefiguration' and 'open prefiguration'. The former looks inwards and tends towards operating as an insular enclave, whereas the latter looks outwards and tends to exhibit a commitment to contesting the existing hegemonic order, albeit not in a totalizing, state-centric fashion. In this vein, Richard Day, discussing *movements* guided by prefigurative politics, notes that they "set out to block, resist and render redundant both corporate and state power in local, national and transnational contexts." (Day 2005, 45). Indeed, the Indignados emphasize that their practice of community control should become a 'tool' with which to transform the existing hegemonic order. The Indignados movement, then, is characterized more by open-prefiguration rather than closed-prefiguration, and thus exhibits greater potential in contesting hegemony than Honrubia-Hurtado admits.

Open prefiguration enables the contestation of hegemony by disrupting, in both direct and indirect manners, the power relations that underpin the existing social order. First, alternative spatial and social relations directly contribute to the contestation of hegemony by acting as a basis for 'blocking' or 'resisting' the flows of capital and state power. Such disruptions of 'normality' may take the form of strikes in order to assert the power of labour against capital, election boycotts in order to challenge the legitimacy of the political system, and blockades of parliaments in order to disrupt the operation of the political system, all of which have featured in the strategic action of the Indignados movement.

For example, on 15 June 2011, the movement in Barcelona attempted to blockade the regional parliament, which was debating measures to cut regional spending on social services by around 10 per cent.[10] Several thousand protesters formed a human chain and constructed barricades, blocking entrances to the

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[10] BBC, "Barcelona: Angry crowd pursues Catalan MPs", 15 June 2011. Online: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13774761 (accessed 28 October 2011).

Catalan parliament. Riot police eventually dispersed the protesters and this demonstration, called by a nominally non-violent movement, eventually resulted in violent clashes between protesters and the riot police. The violence/non-violence debate is certainly a complex one that will divide any radical movement and this paper does not directly address it. This mobilization was nonetheless notable in terms of the movement's willingness to be more confrontational and disruptive of the system. The radical politics of space underpinning the movement, then, holds significant potential in terms of galvanizing such collective action to contest hegemony.

Second, open prefiguration may indirectly contribute to the contestation of hegemony by rendering redundant capital and state power. The contestation of capitalist social relations and the development of non-capitalist social spaces and relations together entail a rejection of the operation of social life according to the dictates of capital and state power. Instead, communities attempt to meet their needs collectively and cooperatively rather than as private individuals; they also attempt to address their local issues through their own participatory institutions rather than the official state procedures. In this way, communities developing new spatial and social relations can meet the diverse needs of human community, not as an insular 'free enclave', but as part of a chain of action that draws power away from state and capital and towards local communities. Furthermore, the existence of new spatial and social relations demonstrates to others the spuriousness of the dogma that 'there is no alternative' to the existing hegemonic social order. A radical politics of space can thus propel broader practices of resistance to the existing hegemony.

4. Concluding remarks

There is, of course, no completion, finality, or purity in a politics of space concerned with radical social transformation. The contestation of hegemony is a perpetual struggle and the spatial politics of the Indignados movement should thus be understood as an intervention, an attempted rupture in dominant spatial relations, from which a broader contestation of the existing hegemonic order may result. The politics of space, then, facilitates radical social change more in the fashion of an 'interstitial' process than some totalizing one-shot Revolution aimed at the state. That is, revolution exists in the interstices, or 'cracks' in society, where a crack is understood as a current insubordination rather than a *project* for the future. These cracks may certainly embody visions and ideals of a future society, though they are not programmatic in this respect. The transformation of social spaces and social relations, then, serves primarily to enable the empowerment of people in opposition to the existing order. From this perspective, the revolutionary aim becomes to expand and multiply the cracks and promote their confluence in order to achieve a breakthrough of a new world (Holloway 2010).

The occupation of public space, then, is significant insofar as it enables the emergence of new spaces. By living and asserting a different way of doing and

organizing within public space, the Indignados movement has shown the potential for occupations to contest dominant spatial relations. This shifts the boundaries of the way in which space is produced such that the 'abstract space' that obtains under capitalism may give way to a more 'differentiated space', whereby the diverse needs of human community determine the way in which space is conceived and used. This attempt to develop new social spaces, however, must be conducted as a coherent strategy of a sustained movement, rather than a fleeting experiment of a Temporary Autonomous Zone. That is, the effective emergence of new space requires the durable contestation of social space. A necessary aspect of a radical politics of space is thus the development of new social relations to underpin the emergence of new social spaces. In this regard, the Indignados movement's occupations have facilitated the development of new horizontal social relations through experiments in grassroots participatory democracy. There are, of course, notable challenges in terms of remaining vigilant to the possible development of informal hierarchies within apparently egalitarian spaces, but the trajectory towards greater horizontality in such spaces is clear.

For movements concerned with a radical transformation of society, this politics of space must be resolutely employed as a tool for the broader contestation of the existing order. In part, this entails a commitment to *inclusive coalition building* – securing high levels of involvement, and intensity of involvement, from wider sections of society. This requires an 'open' form of prefigurative politics that looks outwards in order to unite broader struggles with a common commitment to disrupting the flows of state and capital power. More substantively, this politics of space must be regarded as part of a *repertoire* of action available to movements. As such, it may be employed so as to fortify direct confrontational tactics such as strikes and blockades of legislatures. It may also facilitate more indirect methods of rendering state and capital redundant through carrying out core social, political, and economic functions for the diverse needs of human community rather than in subordination to the demands of capital.

In slightly less contentious terms, a politics of space also serves to provide greater weight to discrete protest demands such as the Indignados movement's demands for electoral reform, nationalization and regulation of the banking sector, and improved public services. From this perspective, the occupation of public space is best regarded as an ongoing rupture of the regular flow of power in the existing order. Of course, there remain open questions concerning the possible and desirable relationships of a politics of space with other strategies, particularly those that more directly posit a desirable future society. Such issues certainly merit further theoretical attention. The fundamental insight developed in this paper, though, is that the occupation of public spaces plays a crucial role in the important task of transforming social relations from below.

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About the author

Puneet Dhaliwal is an MPhil candidate in Political Theory at University College, Oxford and is involved in various campaigns. Having worked on War on Want's Palestine campaign and Corporations & Conflict campaign, he went on to co-ordinate the food sovereignty campaign of 6 Billion Ways, a coalition of global justice campaigners. He will shortly return to War on Want to continue its campaign on private military and security companies, with a focus on G4S, the world's largest security company. He can be contacted at puneet.dhaliwal AT politics.ox.ac.uk.