

No stable ground: living real democracy in Occupy

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Abstract

This paper examines Occupy in order to explore the incredibly complex and temporarily situated realities of living and researching real democracy in this movement. It is a story that highlights just how much was going on within the movement and that democracy – as practised in many aspects of Occupy – was not an ideal form of society. Instead, it was a real democracy, characterised by a degree of messiness and uncertainty that is common to the realities of all political action. It is worth preserving this complex picture because it has very real consequences for the ways in which we may think about our political engagement and strive for radical social change.

This article is meant as a response to all those Occupy participants and observers who found themselves feeling cynical and disillusioned by the movement. I do not aim to defend or idealise Occupy but I do want to give a taste of the complexity and multidimensionality of this movement situation. It is very easy (perhaps even too easy) to claim that some things were done wrong and some were not accomplished at all. To do so in a constructive way is an important part of the movement's reflection process, but being cynical about the movement while not appreciating that it had its own complex dynamic can hardly bring us to some place better. Even if one claims that Occupy failed to achieve its goals, one has to admit that it nevertheless succeeded in showing that it is always possible to significantly disrupt the business-as-usual reality and practise a different form of self-government. And if nothing else, its strength lies in reaffirming to a new generation that such a possibility is always real and mobilising our appetites for more and better.

The analysis is based on more than five months of “militant ethnographic” and participatory action research within the Occupy movement in Dublin but the article draws most heavily on semi-structured interviews with twenty six participants in various Occupies in the San Francisco Bay Area as well as with five members of Occupy Dame Street in Dublin and eight from Occupy Cork in Ireland.

In early summer 2012, I arrived in Oakland with my pocket recorder and a set of spare batteries. I wanted to check where the people from Occupy were at, participate in whatever actions I could, hear some of their stories, share mine, and depart with a well-intentioned but still pretty obscure promise that we will all benefit from the experience. As a perpetual immigrant, I could not offer anything more than that.

Back in Ireland, months flew by while I was trying to code the interviews and decipher pages filled with miniature worm-like zigzags. One evening as I was turning a loose page in my Oakland notebook, an emphatic arrow with the word research next to it stood out. It was pointing to a little note that said: "City Hall and amphitheatre in front." That was it. I went back to my photos from Oakland. It turned out that when I had been scanning them, I mechanically skipped over ones with no "action" in them. I glanced over the photos of an empty Oscar Grant Plaza where Occupy Oakland used to have its main encampment. Now displaying them on a computer screen, I smiled at the sight of the unpretentious amphitheatre at the foot of the magnificent construction of City Hall. The structure of the amphitheatre looks relatively new and consists of four levels of concrete benches that encircle a light blue and greyish dais of six half-round steps. The terrazzo features Lake Merritt, City Hall and the Jack London oak tree as its central images. This was the place where numerous Occupy Oakland assemblies were held and it is the exact spot where on the night of 26th October 2011 Occupy Oakland reached an agreement to hold a general strike a week after. The action on 2nd November 2011 was the first general strike in Oakland and the entire United States since 1946.

What was so special about the amphitheatre? Perhaps, as one of the occupiers told me, his voice raising and becoming subdued from excitement: "It was like it was made for it!" I started remembering that I had talked about this peculiar structure with other people in Oakland and how they were laughingly encouraging me to "research" the history of that place. At the time, I did not make much of these suggestions although I did think that it was a great stroke of ironic luck to have the amphitheatre in such a symbolic place. Much the same way as it was ironic to be able to stage a five-month occupation in the spacious Central Bank plaza, located amidst an otherwise crowded and densely interlaced Temple Bar area in Dublin.

We know for certain that the Central Bank plaza was not meant to be a place for airing public grievances and sustained civil disobedience. The "big bank" was finished in 1980. It is a suspended structure which means that it was literally built from the top down, because each floor was assembled at the ground level and then hoisted up, with the top floor going up first to be suspended from two tall concrete towers that constitute the core of the construction (Anon 2010). Originally, the plaza did not have a fence around the grand stairs leading to the entrance of the building but the sole function of the inviting benches and granite pavement with fan-shaped patterns was only to balance the sharp and austere curvature of the great building.

Was the amphitheatre in front of Oakland City Hall made for public assemblies of self-governing communities? I knew that tracing the original intentions of planners and investors might prove an utterly futile exercise but I decided to try anyway. And I am glad that I did – however briefly – because there is an illuminating story behind it. When the City Hall at 14th Street and Broadway (Oakland's fifth city hall) was built in 1914, it was the tallest building west of the Mississippi and considered to be cutting edge – built in Beaux Arts-style, setting new trends by combining traditional civic roles with a high rise office building. It had 14 floors and accommodated a city jail, police and fire stations and even a hospital (Ward 2011). The plans to renovate the plaza began in the 1960s and by 1984 the intention was to make it into a symbolic civic and ceremonial centre. It was proposed that one of the objectives of the square should be “a performance space with both stage and audience areas, holding rallies and demonstrations, formal City Hall arrivals and departures” (California City Hall Redesign Committee 1984, p.8). As the design efforts were shaping up in the 1980s, nobody foresaw that they would be brought to an abrupt halt.

The Loma Prieta earthquake that struck Oakland and the San Francisco Bay Area in October 1989 left City Hall severely damaged. From the outside it might not have seem like much – only the clock tower hovering over the massive structure suffered the most. But had the shaking continued, it was only a matter of seconds before it would have collapsed. The structural core of the building was also severely damaged. The amount of resources needed to fix it was immense and the city needed to decide what to do with the evacuated building.

Thanks to money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Oakland Redevelopment Agency and local bond issue, the building was completely restored (Anon 1997). As part of the \$85 million deal, the building received a significant earthquake retrofitting. The new base isolation system required that 90 steel structural columns be cut off from the concrete foundation of the building, lifted up, placed upon a platform made of concrete and steel, which in turn rests on 113 steel-encased rubber bearings bolted to the foundation. That essentially means that the building itself is not attached to its foundation so that in the case of an earthquake, it can move from 18-20 inches laterally (Burt 2009). The building is rootless, so to speak; it does not have a stable foundation.

In 1994 a decision was made to rename City Hall Plaza “Frank H. Ogawa Plaza” after a Japanese-American Oakland City Councilman who served for 28 years and died of lung cancer (Obituary Mercury News Wire Services 1994). A year after, in 1995 Oakland City Council voted to spend \$102 million of the city and city's redevelopment agency's money on a project to restore downtown. This anti-blight push to counteract the results of the earthquake and the 1980s' recession identified the local stores and artists as potential losers of the new project (DelVecchio 1995b). Who was to gain from it? Well, it was going to provide space for hundreds of City workers and boost property values in the abandoned urban core. In the mid-1990s, the local media also unashamedly declared that the redevelopment project will help the plaza in front of City Hall

to “become the public ground it was meant to be” and even assist in “reaffirm[ing] the democratic tradition of the civic plaza” (DelVecchio 1995a).

When completed in 1998, the project – together with its restoration of Frank Ogawa Plaza – was to encourage street life (DelVecchio 1995a; DelVecchio 1995c). Most likely, the city advisers did not even imagine the kind of street life that Occupy Oakland brought to this place in October 2011. The movement renamed the square “Oscar Grant Plaza” after a black man shot dead by a BART police officer on 1st January 2009 and in recognition of the struggle for justice for Oscar Grant that has been going on since then.

At the press conference a day after the (first) eviction of the Occupy encampment carried out for variously defined “safety reasons,” Mayor Quan said that the city agencies were trying to “restore the park as a free speech area” (Anon 2011). Oscar Grant Plaza was to remain a place for democratic and free debate only on the condition that there will be no tents, tarps and sleeping bags! In other words, in a building unattached to its foundation, we were told that the plaza could only function as a democratic and public space if the very activity of democratic conversation and radical protest – now suspended – remains an abstract possibility; a possibility that stays unrealised.

Some may claim that the protest could have been more successful or continued if the participants had not insisted on the occupation as their main strategy, or could have ensured the safety of all. In other words, maybe Occupy would have been allowed to stay or come back if it could be guaranteed that there would be no injuries, knife-pulling, drug dealing, sexual harassment and homelessness (sic!). If the city officials were pressed further for their ideal notions of exercising the right to free speech, we would soon discover that the City's idea of protest does not amount to much that could really bear its name.

While occupying and trying to practise real democracy in the here and now, we cannot eliminate the possibility that it will be a messy and challenging endeavour with its own inconsistencies, deformations and problems. But this is exactly why it is called *real* democracy. If we were to get rid of all messiness, we would be left with an empty egg shell that might be perfectly round and smooth but has not a trace of a potential for life in it. Democracy, in the end, is about the idea that no idea for governing ourselves is good enough to last for ever. No idea can be that universal. Funnily enough, it seems that sometimes we need a quake to realise that the ground under our ways of governing is not that stable after all.

This paper examines Occupy in order to explore the incredibly complex and temporarily situated realities of living and researching real democracy in this movement. It is an example of a militant research(er) trying to “feed back in” and speak to all those Occupy participants and observers who found themselves feeling cynical and disillusioned by the movement. I do not aim to defend or idealise Occupy but I do want to give a taste of the complexity and multidimensionality of this movement situation. It is very easy (perhaps even too easy) to claim that some things were done wrong and some were not accomplished at all. To do so in a constructive way is an important part of the

movement's reflection process, but being cynical about the movement while not appreciating that it had its own complex dynamic can hardly bring us to a better place. Even if one claims that Occupy failed to achieve its goals, one has to admit that it nevertheless succeeded in showing that it is always possible to significantly disrupt the business-as-usual reality and practise a different form of self-government. And if nothing else, its strength lies in firstly, reaffirming to a new generation that such a possibility is always real and, secondly, in mobilising our appetites for more and better.

Below is a story that highlights just how much was going on within the movement and that democracy – as practised in many aspects of Occupy – was not an ideal form of society. It was a real democracy characterised by a degree of messiness and uncertainty that is connected to the realities of all political action. I write this text because I think that in all our efforts to create ideally egalitarian, purely anarchist or exclusively vegan spaces, however important they are, we tend to forget that the real potential of social movements always lurks in their inconsistencies and indeterminations – or in the fact that when radical social change happens, it never already has a stable ground to rely on but seems to be a result of a particular plurality. Preserving this complex picture has very real consequences for ways in which we may think about our political engagement and strive for radical social change.

The analysis is based on more than five months of “militant ethnographic” and participatory action research within the Occupy movement in Dublin but the article draws most heavily on semi-structured interviews with twenty six participants in various Occupies in the San Francisco Bay Area as well as with five members of Occupy Dame Street in Dublin and eight from Occupy Cork in Ireland.¹

Real, ideal or prefigured?

In Occupy, we practised the ideal or prefigured version of direct democracy. Prefigurative politics denotes a politics that is based on horizontal, autonomous and leaderless forms of self-organising and struggle. Its aim is to prefigure the world we want to live in in the here and now of the ways in which social movements and autonomous groups govern themselves and organise actions. The term is relatively new as it was first used in reference to some of the movements of the 1960s and its meaning is appealing to many strands of anti-authoritarian organising. Recently, most of the activity that was happening under the Occupy banner could be summed up as prefigurative politics:

the public assemblies, the consensus decision making, the collective spaces in the camps, and the diverse forms of collaborative self-management constitute a set of concrete alternative practices that serve as powerful symbolic yet embodied

1 For more analysis on Occupy in Ireland, see for example Szolucha 2013.

contrasts between an inclusive, grassroots, and participatory democracy as it ought to be and the current configuration of a representative “democratic” system that serves the interests of the 1%. (Juris 2012, p.272)

We, the New York City General Assembly, [...] urge you to assert your power. Exercise your right to peaceably assemble; occupy public space; create a process to address the problems we face, and generate solutions accessible to everyone. (NYC General Assembly 2011)

True, the scene in Liberty Plaza may seem messy and chaotic but it's also a laboratory of possibility, creating a diversity of ideas, expression and art. (Gupta 2011)

Through its emphasis on practice, experimentation and direct action in such spaces of experience as the Occupy encampments and the movement as a whole, prefigurative politics makes meaningful social change palpable to all participants. This is visible in the politicising effects that Occupy had. The camps were structured and operated in ways that could prefigure communities in which people would like to live in the future. The direct democratic ways of making decisions may provide some clues as to how to facilitate more democratic ways of self-governance. It is as Maeckelbergh put it that in prefigurative politics, “the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present. Prefiguration is a practice through which movement actors create a conflation of their ends with their means. It is an enactment of the ultimate values of an ideal society within the very means of struggle for that society” (2009, p.67)

I remain sympathetic to such an understanding of prefiguration and think that it is a helpful category to describe parts of movement practice. However, I am still concerned to reinforce an insight that is not necessarily at odds with prefiguration but may be significantly lacking from the picture of social movement struggles. Namely, it seems that a way forward from prefigurative politics is either constantly perfecting already known practices or trying to approach an absent ideal of those practices i.e. preparing a “viable alternative” that can one day substitute for the current arrangements. As important as they are, they cannot by themselves, however, prompt a new social movement or start a period of political upheaval. Like Occupy, most political “moments of excess” (The Free Association 2011) seem to burst out of nowhere and their rationale and genealogy are always supplied in reality after – not prior – to the event. Does that mean that we should resign all efforts to understand situations when fundamental breaks happen? I think not. Can we then predict them? I do not know that but I think that there is a way to learn something about them that we cannot simply learn by following the theoretical framework and narrative of prefigurative politics.

When Occupy happened, we tended to call *real* the ideal or prefigured version of direct democracy that we were practising. Paradoxically, however, by conflating the real and the ideal in the present, the concept of prefiguration to a large extent loses what is real about it. It glosses over many of the inescapably

temporal processes that are at play simultaneously with prefiguration. These processes are embedded in relationally structured interactions of people from different social groups, cyclical time of embodied engagement, burnout and rest, the temporal time of spaces of experience, the push and pull dynamics of autonomous organising, the mechanisms of creating divisions, and finally times of critical self-reflection of all those involved. All of them engage people's memories, senses, bodies and make demands on their intuition. By rescuing some of these experiences of living real democracy, we can reveal many of the issues of the "day after" any political moment of excess or social change on a grand scale.

My aim in trying to highlight this aspect of Occupy is not to provide a list of "issues where we need to start next time there is a revolution." Instead of supplying the ground for a political action in the future, it may actually serve better to think about it in terms of doing away with any ground – assuming the inevitability that all future experiences of living real democracy will be singular and although they may bear some similarities to the issues that I will outline below, the answers that we find would have to be developed in their particular circumstances and time.

By focusing on living temporalities of Occupy, I attempt to present a more complex and fuller picture of the local lives of the movement. They involve processes that are social, temporarily situated and usually non-linear in nature. By concentrating on this aspect of a movement, one can achieve two things. Firstly, the real of political action is brought back to the equation. All people's lived experiences are affirmed and valued as opposed to only those that fit a particular theoretical framework or narrative. Secondly, my contention is that the complexity and inconsistencies of those temporalities is the field where all potential for real social change comes from. Unexpected situations arise where people's creativity has to be mobilised on the spot. Different viewpoints, facts and beliefs mingle in a way that is much more productive in responding to social challenges than any one political doctrine. In the current political and economic system, this mixing up of political outlooks and situations is precisely what there may be a need for:

I think that personally, it's a disservice to Occupy to say that Occupy is x, y and z and this is how it's run. That's people being just exactly as deeply embedded in like archaic or inflexible as our current system of government is. Like isn't that what we are fighting against? Then why would you stagnate something that has the potential to be so fluid and evolve to really fit the needs of specific situations? I'm very irritated by people that are like 'this isn't Occupy!' and I think that in some senses, their feelings are valid but I think we need to have a sense of flexibility as a 'movement' because I'm sorry, things change all the time. We can't be static especially if you're trying, you know, to ostensibly bring down capitalism. (interview, 19 June 2012 A1)

There are obviously two immediate temporalities that are engaged below: one is that of an unfolding action and the other marks the time of critical self-reflection and story-sharing in settings where I was the person with the recorder. As such, they reveal a wonderful panoply of the ways in which we construct and relate to our realities. There are moments of euphoria, hope, confusion, disappointment, quite a bit of strong language, self-critique, acts of taking sides and making excuses, articulations of burnout, sharing of rumours, explanations of contradictions, blurring of the line between conviction that something is possible and the fact that it actually happened. All of them are important because they shape people's actions in very real ways and contribute to the potential of social movements.

In what follows, I will try to outline a few aspects of living real democracy in the Occupy movement. First, I would like to highlight some of the issues connected to social problems as well as to interactions of people from different social/political groups within Occupy. Subsequently, there will be a short description of the temporality of physical engagement and burnout. I will then move on to briefly discuss the non-permanent character of the encampments. Before concluding with a reflection on the nature of radical political engagement, I will outline some of the controversies around the issues of autonomous actions and divisions within the movement.

Living real democracy in Occupy

Living real democracy in Occupy was challenging. Doing it as a participant-researcher was even more so. I have always been interested in the subjective realities of people's political engagement. What influences them? How do they respond in a challenging environment? I wanted to know what we can learn from our experiences of activism that will help us bring about real social change. Soon I realised that I would not be able to do that without talking about issues that are difficult, sensitive or in other ways, less convenient for the movement. In places where I return to such issues, this is not to rehash old tensions but to reaffirm our own imperfections, complexities of our life-worlds and necessary inconsistencies of our actions as valuable experiences that help us learn about how real change happens. And since it never happens as an automatic implementation of an ideal plan, why not accept these complexities as an inevitable part of our struggles and learn from them?

Social problems and social/political groups in Occupy

When Occupy opened up democratic spaces where everybody could have their voice heard, it revealed a lot of the things that are the results of the political and economic system that we live in but had been repressed or in other ways pushed to the margins of society. This was especially apparent with regard to homelessness and mental health issues. All of these issues informed the ways in which the occupations unfolded.

Some participants claimed that they made Occupy dangerous places (to some groups). But they also make Occupy a deeply informative experience. It immediately made everybody aware that their individual ideas of what “society” was were perhaps not as accurate as they thought. And a grand social change will have to include everyone. Different camps had their own rules as to what they did with threatening or aggressive behaviour. Occupy Dame Street usually called the police to intervene – something that many of the participants always felt uneasy about. Occupy Oakland, on the other hand, did not allow the police into the camp. Hence, the participants realised that figuring out how to deal with people who were “difficult” without the help of a network of social programmes, state enforcement agencies, NGOs, charities or sheer day-to-day ignorance would be hard. But it would also be worthwhile if the break of the state system is to be achieved (interview, 28 June 2012 B).

On the one hand, the encampments did provide a number of services that catered towards the homeless people such as the kitchen, medical tents etc. These were obviously not adequate and not enough, but as one occupier from San Francisco told me it is still more than the government is willing to do for these people and simply “we have hearts and we have rules and here we are and what the fuck are we supposed to do?” (interview, 22 June 2012). The same person shared an anecdote with me where there was a woman who was stabbed (not in relation to Occupy) while the camp was still in operation. Instead of an emergency room, however, she asked to be brought to Justin Herman Plaza (where the encampment was) as she knew that they had a first aid centre there. So all sorts of people in need were gravitating towards Occupy because this is where many of them were finding community and a degree of safety.

On the other hand, there was an ongoing friction between the homeless and other people pushed to the margins of society (such as alcoholics, persons with mental health issues etc.) and activist or more middle-class participants. One part of this tension was the debate about who is deserving and undeserving of the social position they found themselves in (Herring and Glück 2011). Another aspect is that any encampment like that was bound to attract all kinds of “opportunists” - trying to sell drugs for example. Furthermore, in Oakland,

[t]here were rumours about different things that I didn't see, you know, like somebody pulled a knife on somebody [...] So there was lots of tensions a lot of people couldn't handle, you know. It was pretty rough. I think for some homeless people it might have been intense but it was like maybe like a step up cause there was food and there was like community [...]. The positive outweigh the negative for some people [...] I would say that the dynamic was, the first day was maybe 90% - and I'm not sure that this is the best dichotomy but I think there is something to it – there was like 90% activists, 10% homeless and by the end of the two weeks it's more like 80% homeless, 20% [activists]. (Interview, 27 June 2012 A)

It would be problematic to ascribe the declining feeling of safety to some real threat from the homeless or other disadvantaged groups. But the tensions were there in spite of the fact that it was the centre of Oakland and drug dealing and violent interactions were happening in the plaza before there was an Occupy (interview, 24 June 2012 B), so it would be unrealistic to expect they would stop once the camp was there.

It cannot be ignored that the radically inclusive ethos of Occupy presented real problems for some participants because of the roles that they played. In Occupy Oakland, there was apparently a big man who was mentally ill and notoriously pulled knives on people, but he also became a very committed and influential occupier. He was symbolic in that he exemplified a real transformation through which people become politically engaged and respected members of a community despite our various life situations and struggles. It was a great story when everything was good and well but when the participants from the security committee had to come in to disarm him, they felt like the seriousness of the situation had been trivialised (interview, 18 June 2012). Other participants came to similar conclusions in terms of the limits of their ability to self-govern. Despite their horizontalist persuasions, they rejected the conviction that Occupy was a model that could meet people's needs better than the state can. Importantly, however, they also believed that some of these needs could be probably adequately addressed by directed campaigns and focused direct actions (interview, 19 June 2012 A).

Other campaigns such as Occupy the Farm that was reclaiming the Gill Tract in Berkeley to grow food and meet the needs of the local community, would downplay the needs of the homeless people – and quite consciously so. As two of the participants told me, their aim was not to create a tent city similar to one in Oscar Grant Plaza but to farm the land they were occupying. In order to make that statement, they would take down their tents every morning. This, unfortunately, created tensions within the group and left some people feeling disempowered (interview, 19 June 2012 A1).

There was also uncertainty as to what to do with people and groups who were coming in with their own political agendas. Sometimes a single person would appear and would have some sort of a plan or a blueprint and be trying to persuade others to get behind an idea or a platform that so far included only that one person. Such encounters, however, were relatively rare and singular (interview, 27 June 2012 A). In Dublin, visits of radical political parties or other groups had the ability to generate widespread paranoia as people feared that the movement could be hijacked by any one established political entity. In some activist circles, there was also a tendency to perceive Occupy with a degree of cynical dismissal due to the kind of people that got involved in it later on. After a few months in Occupy Dame Street, people of the Freeman on the Land persuasion gained considerable currency. They were central in many actions organised during that time but their ideas were also somewhat problematic when contrasted with the collective ethos of decision-making or safer spaces policy that the occupation adopted (interview, 7 May 2012).

There was also just the scary and hilarious randomness of what you get in places that are radically open to all. Several times while co-facilitating a GA and as a person with an Anglo-Saxon but not distinctly Irish accent, I was told to effectively shut up and “let the Irish speak.” Another member of the facilitation working group in Dublin was attacked with a plastic sword while simultaneously being made an offer he could not refuse, when one participant put forward a proposal that he will cut the facilitator's head off. But the US occupations were no less engrossing:

Occupy SF is kind of cool actually cause [...] it was just like wild homeless people that started it and there wasn't activists involved at the beginning so they were really feeling their way through it. So they would go through each agenda item but they couldn't figure out how to make decisions generally and it was just wildly people doing the direct response signal back and forth and everyone freaking out at one another and no decisions were being made. And then there's the lady from Barcelona and she's like: 'I'm from the history of collective decision-making and listen to me!' [...] And half of the people were like 'listen to her' and the other people were like 'forget about the Spanish lady' [laughs] (interview, 29 June 2012)

[I]t's like a junky down the square and suddenly you are fed and had a place where you could speak up and you wander around a GA drunk off your ass yelling like 'Michael Jackson' and just crazy ass shit, you know. That comes out. Every other person that nobody would listen to or like all that old form boom boom leftists who never had an audience for their hardcore Trotskyist fucking sermon so then they come to the fore. So like everyone was like – all the New Age shit – they come to the fore. So the GA cannot handle that, you know, especially when all expectations are placed within that vessel. [...] So people still have to learn what the GA can be or should be. [...] [W]e just have to put some means and procedural stuff in order to keep all the fruit loops and the bullshit communist party like solidarity statements and rubber stamps – like keep that in the wings. And there are a couple of simple rules out there that can [help do that]. Cause no matter what's people's intentions and what the greater political context unless you keep that shit at bay, there are only so many times that people are gonna come back to a four hour meeting on a cold concrete to listen to a total bullshit from a Stalinist. And for me, that's like once, you know. I had a lifetime of that shit. (interview, 25 June 2012 B)

Burnout

Many of the participants of Occupy experienced it as a moment of very intense involvement. Not surprisingly, most of them could not sustain that level of engagement and felt that they burnt out. There were three main factors that were often pointed to as responsible for this. The first was the limited numbers of people who were committed to do the work. In each case, a lot of it depended on just a few individuals who would be consistent in their involvement and determined to see their plans through (interview, 20 June 2012 A). The

constantly shifting participation did not prove conducive to promoting attitudes of responsibility and accountability to the group.

Another factor was that a lot of the participants had other significant work or family responsibilities. When being a part of Occupy was put on top of these, it simply was not sustainable. In some cases, what helped avoid burnout was limiting one's involvement to fewer roles or helping the camp develop rota systems that enabled people to contribute at a level that was not that overwhelming (interview, 4 May 2012). In other instances, however, the feeling of burnout coincided with withering enthusiasm and declining participation in general (interview, 19 June 2012 B). It was not very likely that people who left for these reasons would come back once they felt more rested because the issue was only partially bodily and mental exhaustion.

The third and most prominent factor that contributed to burnout was the sheer roughness and challenges of the situation in which a group of people occupies 24/7 a space in the middle of a city centre – sometimes throughout the winter season. One participant of Occupy Dame Street even said that it was like a war zone – because of a feeling of being constantly under threat (interview, 24 April 2012). Or as another occupier from Dublin explained it, it was

[a] very challenging physical environment in which we had no electricity, no hot water, no, you know, it's lashing rain, it's windy, there is no computer. People are worried about their shelter, about their food, their safety. People are getting robbed, people are getting physically attacked on a nightly basis, people would come and throw rocks onto the tents [...]. People would come and urinate onto people's tents, like passing strangers. You know what I mean? You're dealing with that kind of environment. You're trying to maintain life on a city street. Very quickly that sort of absorbed all energy and time of the people who were camping there. So in that sense it was just a feature of the nature of the physical environment. (interview 4 May 2012)

It should come as no surprise then that when the encampments were no longer in place many of the participants expressed their relief that there was not as much activity for some time (interview, 29 June 2012). The experience of the Occupy encampment also made people aware of the amount of hard work that had to be put into it in order to make it work. While still recovering from the first wave of Occupy Oakland, one participant confessed that when there were plans for January 28th action of taking over the Kaiser Convention Center (dubbed the Move-In Day), she thought:

well, there might be an occupation but I kind of hope it doesn't work because I don't feel totally ready to start doing something and let my life being taken over by this, you know. Or I hope that it just lasts a weekend. And then I hope that they shut it down. You know what – it's just so much work. (interview, 18 June 2012)

Camps as non-permanent spaces

One of the hardest things to imagine when you start an occupation is how it is going to end or even that it is going to end, eventually (O'Dwyer 2011). Part of the reason for this is the initial enthusiasm and a firm belief that once – what at the time seems like the most difficult part – we got all the people together to form an encampment, we are onto a winner. However, in Occupy Dame Street as well as Oakland, it took just a few weeks for the participants to realise that it is a hard task (and one that requires conscious efforts) to sustain that initial enthusiasm and engagement.

Furthermore, after these first few weeks there was already more talk about switching to direct actions and issue campaigns instead of treating the camp as the only manifestation of the movement. For some participants, Occupy camps were to serve the purpose of developing political leadership, a degree of “political sophistication” and helping people experience alternative ways of living and making decisions. The encampments had to empower everybody in a process of mutual learning. They could not be permanent if their goal was to encourage people to go on and lead in their own communities (interview, 28 June 2012 B).

Nevertheless, there were also people who remained deeply committed to the task of withholding the plazas. Once attempts at reoccupying proved unsuccessful, this overemphasis on the centrality of the camps turned out to be harmful to the movement. When the camps were gone, it left the participants with no particular issue or anchor from which to take the struggle to the next level (interview, 26 June 2012). Similarly, in cases where participants got rid of their camps themselves, there was a feeling that they “didn't have the juice to come back” (interview, 19 June 2012 A).

Often the question of preserving the camp or letting it go encompasses a number of issues. One of them are interpersonal and political since any occupation that lasts more than a few days may face the challenges of long-term organising when all political differences and agendas start coming to the fore (interview, 24 June 2012 B). Another issue is less apparent but has to do with the ethos of radical openness and the question of what to do when the camp loses its ability to live up to it.

With regard to the first issue, the encampments that are dragging on for months such as Occupy Dame Street take the problem of interpersonal and political differences to a wholly new level. After four months or so of Occupy in Dublin, the mix of people who remained active and their political persuasions were different than at the start when most of the principles were agreed. The broader context was that there were many hurt feelings and new antagonisms were created because of interpersonal conflicts within Occupy. There were also only a handful of people who kept the camp going and nobody new was joining in at that stage. Several of the structures were still in place but some of the participants wanted to change a few directions that the occupation took at the start – especially in regard to its non-engagement with unions and political

parties. This created a situation in which some people who were involved in the occupation at the beginning wanted it discontinued, while those still participating, thought it should be carried on. If at the beginning, the participants knew that this was going to happen and had time for this debate, it might have been helpful to agree in what circumstances we would finish the physical occupation (interview, 7 May 2012) instead of letting it continue and further deepen the divisions. Even if that was accomplished, though, there is no guarantee that that decision would be followed through.

As for openness, it was one of the main factors that influenced people's opinions about whether the camp should be closed down. In some cases such as Occupy the Farm, the concern was that the occupation may turn into an "Occupy wildlife preserve" where people outside of a fencing put up by the police were observing those on the inside. "As opposed to what we had before which was the occupation was holding the space open for anyone to come and go" (interview, 19 June 2012 A2). Eventually, the participants decided to end the occupation themselves. The argument that the camp was no longer a radically open space and hence should be disbanded was also used in reference to Occupy Dame Street but it was made by the people who were no longer central to the occupation at that stage (interview, 7 May 2012) so there was not any move to terminate the encampment and it was eventually evicted by the police.

Autonomous actions

At the core of the notion of autonomous action is the conviction that decentralised self-organising is more efficient and conducive to human freedom and creativity than organising that is led by a central body. Autonomous activities and the related practice of diversity of tactics are also vessels through which the complexity of the movement and the variety of actors involved are reflected. Strategically, autonomous actions translate into and support a multitude of struggles. There does not have to be a unanimous agreement on what issues are most important and which ways of organising are best. The point is to try out many because nobody knows which of them or what particular combination is going to strike a chord in the general population (interview, 7 May 2012).

In practice, however, autonomous action presents a real quandary for the place of the consensus process. One of the roles of the GAs in Occupy was to debate and agree on the actions that would be undertaken under its banner. This should ensure that people exercise democratic control over what is happening in the name of Occupy and that there is at least a degree of accountability for whatever action is taken. The argument goes that without that decision-making centre, there would be very little cohesiveness in the movement. It would also make it more difficult for new people to join in if all the work was done in committees and did not have to go through a broader approval process (interview, 24 June 2012 A). On the one hand, it may be important that not just any action can claim to be Occupy. On the other hand, this can limit the role of

the GA to providing a mere rubber stamp for an action (interview, 23 June 2012). But then what does it really mean that something was endorsed by or called Occupy and is it that important what it is called? As one member of the facilitation and environmental justice committees pointed out:

So it's all kind of murky. [...] What does it mean when Occupy Oakland actually endorses something [...]? It means that roughly 100 people [the quorum] were in that place and got convinced to endorse it. And we've endorsed [...] some stuff that we know nothing about. (20 June 2012 A)

Moreover, if a group plans an autonomous action, it is likely that it is going to happen whether it is or it is not called Occupy. This is also a position that Occupy Oakland seemed to reach after a few debates about the proposals to adopt some sort of non-violence policy against the rule of thumb embracing diversity of tactics. Even if any of these proposals were passed, that would not stop anybody from organising autonomous actions and engaging in property destruction i.e. a behaviour contrary to the agreed policy. This simply is not one of the things that could be resolved by making a collective decision about it (interview, 29 June 2012).

It would, however, be inaccurate (as many have done) to perceive this tension between autonomous action and collective decision-making as a tension between two groups of people who prefer opposite modes of action or have different political inclinations. This tension is structural rather than merely ideological or personal. It is more than just “talkers versus doers.” In fact, there are many temporal factors that influence people’s decisions to take one side in this ongoing debate rather than the other. One participant who helped organise a number of actions in Occupy Oakland, for example, has always supported the philosophy and practice of diversity of tactics. When the proposal to adopt a non-violence policy in Occupy came up, however, he voted against diversity of tactics because he disagreed with the particular interpretation that was used and was disappointed by how the recent autonomous actions went down. They seemed to be organised as if diversity of tactics was synonymous with the everything goes attitude whereas for him, it should really be an attempt to find some sort of unity while recognising each other’s differences (interview, 27 June 2012 A). Similarly, even the people who in Occupy Oakland were called insurrectionists and often chose not to attend the GAs, still recognised the importance of some sort of a central decision-making and deliberation body for the movement. Creating an indoor space where GAs could take place was one of the motivations behind the Move-In Day in January 2012 – an action that the “insurrectionist crowd” was key in organising (interview, 24 June 2012 A2).

Divisions

The topic of divisions within the Occupy movement is so rich that it would merit a separate paper. There were differences between people who were involved in

the camps from the beginning and those that joined later on. Tensions emerged between the campers and the people who were active participants but slept off site. There were all sorts of frictions between persons who wandered off the camps to start their own campaigns and those who stayed in Occupy. In Ireland, the issue of nationalism and the various manifestations of republicanism regularly came to the fore. There was fear of being hijacked by a political party or the weak and corrupted trade unions on the one hand, and the old leftist mantra that they had to be central in any revolutionary struggle on the other. The lines of divisions were multiple, crisscrossing or overlapping and sometimes constantly changing.

Within any movement, various divisions reflect its internal diversity of interests and outlooks. They are far more than just that, however. They are unfolding processes that make problematic any stark and rationalistic judgements about “who is with and against whom” like in the following fragment about the insurrectionists in Occupy Oakland:

After these non-violence debates went away, so did they [the insurrectionists]. Even though I do not wholly agree with them tactically, strategically a lot of the times, *it's been like a kind of a vacuum beyond bodies*. [...] It's like that radical, anarchist, political analysis like wasn't there. Like I mean it was there cause a lot of us were anarchists but it could have been more of it there in those General Assemblies so that those younger people [...] would be mingling with them and talking to them, hearing the arguments, deciding for themselves like 'yeah, that's right, this black bloc over here right in the smoking section is like pretty smart, right?' (interview, 24 June 2012 A2)

In the above, even though this member of the labour solidarity committee disagreed with the people using the black bloc tactic, he thought that their participation was an important part of the movement. Their presence brought developmental benefits for the younger activists and their political analysis constituted a vital radical part of the movement that helped make it what it was.

Couldn't the same effect be achieved through the use of the internet? Since the Arab Spring the mainstream discourse has hailed the new opportunities for organising and communication brought about by the social media. It is true that the Occupy movement used the internet extensively and creatively to extend its reach and help people stay in touch with the movement. Most occupations had their webpages, Facebook profiles, Twitter and livestream accounts. Participants created innumerable mailing lists and online forums that all mirrored to some extent the horizontal ways of organising within the movement (Juris 2008). What cannot be overlooked, however, is that the debates that took place on the internet were the most heated and negative. These debates had the ability to heighten divisions rather than strive for resolution. The online mode of these discussions also made some participants worried about the things that were being exposed about the movement and who they were exposed to. The worst part of it was that any such argument could feed many others, if a

sentence or phrase was taken out of context and tweeted out with the aim of sparking the next controversy (interview, 24 June 2012 A). Therefore, the internet is far from a benevolent tool and a mode of non-face-to-face discussion can be quite problematic in movement contexts.

There were, however, certain circumstances when many divisions were put aside. The most obvious of those were when the police cracked down on the encampments. At the GA after the camp in Dublin was evicted, everybody came out – even the people who were most embittered by their experience on Dame Street and left the camp a long time ago. After the first eviction of Occupy Oakland, three thousand people gathered in front of City Hall and decided to have a general strike. In other instances such as Occupy the Farm, very clear ideological differences were disregarded when there was a lot of physical work that needed to be done (interview, 19 June 2012 A). Furthermore, the beginning stages of all occupations also tended to welcome differences rather than treat them as a cause for concern or suspicion.

Conclusion, or what we can learn for our future political engagement

Political struggle is a never ending endeavour. The roles that people play in it are varied and constantly shifting. A one-time window-smasher becomes an old codger and a patient one who advises younger participants how to avoid arrest. In periods of intense engagement, participants become more involved, only to fall back on their earlier identities and roles once these periods are over. New activists throw themselves into work for radical social change, get burnt out and leave with bitterness or swallow the pill of immediate dissatisfaction, recognise the monstrosity of work that needs to be done and get committed to their struggle for the long haul. All of these are entirely normal processes that testify to the cyclical, protracted and sometimes unexpected ways in which social change happens.

When understood in this way, political engagement encourages attitudes that are humble and steer away from overstating one's influence and centrality. As one member of the anti-foreclosure group in Oakland pointed out, in movements that would mean opening oneself up to the dictates of reality. And reality of Occupy is that it might be just one of the more formative moments of the war of position rather than manoeuvre (interview, 25 June 2012 B). However, the truth is that there is no objective benchmark that one can use to prove or disprove that conclusion. If radical social change happens through constant perfecting of our known forms of self-governance, palpable experiences of alternative social systems as well as “discontinuous invention of a new form” (interview, 24 June 2012 B), then all judgements about the reality of the movement are temporarily situated and prone to change in the future.

What is the formula for bringing about radical social change based on this understanding of the nature of political engagement? I think it is already visible in the recent movements such as Occupy and in some of the activities of the

Anonymous, in that they are not primarily driven by the quest to institutionalise some already worked-out, more democratic system of governance (or even one in the making, for that matter). Instead, they are protesting against the limits imposed on their political imagination (Graeber 2011) and hence, enacting the distance between the current arrangements on the one hand, and ways of living that are beyond the coordinates of what we now perceive as possible on the other. This is why the participants do not know yet what ideas for a better society they might have had, had they not lived in the current system. Thanks to the experience of living real democracy, however, they may be much more aware that what they lost by the imposition of neoliberalism and liberal representative democracy was not some benign and problem-free unity of all people but rather an ephemeral, peculiar, ever-changing and inconsistent plurality that has not and will never go away.

Here I also need to clarify that the messiness and complexity that I talk about does not designate merely the positive plurality of outlooks and interests as they co-exist in real society, but also the all-important fact that this plurality (with all its claims of what is real) is revealed at the points when social construction fails. When I talk about plurality, I do not mean a sum total of people's "true selves," but rather all the inconsistencies that only come out in these moments of destruction of one social system and a creation of another. Messiness is not simply diversity with all its problematic connotations of persistent and self-identical identities. It is not there to be known and presented as the "truth" that gives shape to an ideal construction. Messiness is what is uncovered when there is a sudden crack in the dominant order – when I ask myself: "what just happened?"

Why is this understanding important? I think that it helps acknowledge that there is a structural failure at the heart of all systems of governance. The city hall is always already cut off from its foundations and rests on an unstable ground. But it is hard to remember that that is the case if the dominant attitude of the day is business as usual, so that structural and inherent failure may remain a purely abstract idea.

In those rare instances that it does not, the collapse of the dominant structures creates a production that is never finished and it may even be substituted midway by another process. In the place of truth – e.g. as a representational form of democracy and neoliberal economy² – is just a construction produced in temporary and contingent ways. And that is frightening – both that this is something that goes for what truth is, and also that all progressive struggles may one day amount to just that and nothing more.

What Occupy and some other movements of the day did was that they ostentatiously rejected a lot of content that would give their message and demands a semblance of cohesiveness and super-consistency. To be sure, they did say what they thought – capitalism and traditional forms of representative

2 Or a new system of self-governance that is more democratic and responsive to the real needs of the population than the old one, for that matter.

democracy were delegitimised. We wanted *real* democracy. What was it and how was it supposed to work? Well, we had our best go at it by prefiguring it in the ways of practising consensus, for example. That was not entirely “it” and as of today, we still remain (more or less) faithful subjects under the aegis of representative democracy.

The encampments, however, made something else plain clear – we saw it as thoroughly unfair that the powers that be could draw a line between what constitutes a legitimate and illegitimate form of protest. The issue is not about whether we would be allowed to go back to the plazas with tents and sleeping bags or would these items be prohibited. The question about illegitimate forms of protest is also one about transcending the rules of the day. An ethical social structure would in some way incorporate a recognition that one day the time will come when it will have to give in. People will call on its limits and demand that their political imagination be liberated and engaged in a new production. How do we keep space for that open at all times, or is it even sane to ask this question? I guess, if nothing else, there is no harm in mobilising the appetite for trying to answer it.

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