

## **Protest communities and activist enthusiasm: student occupations in contemporary Argentina, Chile and Uruguay**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines how occupation communities shape activist enthusiasm. Based on the analysis of more than sixty interviews with student participants in recent high school and university occupations in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, the paper argues that occupations have complex and contradictory effects on participants due to the relatively long time spans involved and the consequent heightening of risk, intimacy, and community building efforts. On the one hand, they offer exhilarating experiences that foster strong feelings of being a community bound together by affect, moral political commitment, and feelings of collective empowerment and freedom. On the other hand, protracted conflict breeds equally strong feelings of uncertainty, fear, boredom, and/or alienation that put into question the validity of the occupation community. Thus, occupations enthuse activists but can also exhaust and disillusion them, generating some strategic challenges for social movements.*

**Keywords:** Protest, movement communities, occupations, encampments, student movements, mobilization, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay

### **Introduction**

Protest occupations and encampments have been a hallmark of many contemporary social movements.<sup>1</sup> Some, such as Occupy Wall Street in the United States, Okupa in Spain, Ghezi Park in Turkey, and Tahrir Square in Egypt, have become synonymous with the act of occupying or the places they have occupied. Throughout these different contexts, occupations have shared a key characteristic: the on-site emergence of autonomous and self-governing movement communities.

This paper examines how these occupation communities shape activist enthusiasm. It argues that occupations have complex and contradictory effects on participants due to the relatively long time spans involved and the consequent heightening of risk, intimacy, and community building efforts. On

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that occupations have, for a long time, been part of the repertoires of contention of the poor, the unemployed, as well as peasant, labor, indigenous, black, women, and youth movements across the world. In modern times, they have taken many forms, from the Paris Commune to the landless movement in Brazil and beyond.

the one hand, they offer exhilarating experiences that foster strong feelings of being part of a community bound together by affect, moral political commitment, and feelings of collective empowerment and freedom. On the other hand, protracted conflict breeds equally strong feelings of uncertainty, boredom, fear, and/or alienation that put into question the validity of the occupation community. Thus, occupations enthuse activists but can also exhaust and disillusion them, generating some strategic challenges for social movements.

These arguments draw on the analysis of more than sixty in-depth interviews with student participants in recent high school and university occupations in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay.<sup>2</sup> In these three countries student movements have a venerable tradition of occupying schools and universities.<sup>3</sup> Following this tradition, in recent years Argentinean, Chilean and Uruguayan students have staged protest campaigns in order to challenge neoliberal views of education as a private investment rather than a public good and social right. More specifically, students have used occupations, marches, and cultural performances to protest the rising private costs of education, the persistence of socio-economic inequities in access to quality education, the physical and academic deterioration of the public system, the lack of democracy in academic governance, and/or the increasing narrowing of the educational curriculum to market demands, among other specific grievances. These protests have drawn thousands of students and sympathizers, and shut down, for months at a time, significant portions of the secondary and/or university system.

Some accounts of these campaigns suggest in passing that participation in occupations had a significant impact on activist engagement with the student movement (Zibechi 1997; Graña 1996; Aguilera 2006; Alvarez 2008; Domedel and Peña y Lillo 2008; Enrique 2010; Simonsen 2013; Larrondo 2014). Yet, they do not probe this idea or explore the causal mechanisms behind such a relationship. This paper takes on this task. In doing so, it seeks to more broadly contribute to our theoretical understanding of how movement experiences affect activist enthusiasm during heightened moments of mobilization (protest cycles), a topic that has not received enough attention in the broader social movement literature and that has important implications for the study of mobilization processes. In particular, the paper illuminates how occupation community experiences shape participants' understanding of the movement and their feelings and attitudes toward their own involvement in it.

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<sup>2</sup> Interviews for this paper refer to the Argentinean student occupations of 1996 and 2010; the Chilean student occupations of 1996, 2006 and 2011; and the Uruguayan student occupations of 1992, 1996 and 2000.

<sup>3</sup> In Chile, for example, the first recorded student occupation dates back to 1833 when eighty students of the Instituto Nacional, an elite public school, occupied the principal's accommodations to protest against corporal punishment and a too rigid disciplinary system. The use of coordinated school and university occupations became, however, a routine repertoire of southern cone university student movements during the late 1910s and 1920s and of high school movements in the 1940s and 1950s.

The focus of the paper is, thus, not to study individual occupations, or to develop a cross-national comparative analysis of occupations and/or student movements in the southern cone, but to highlight common experiences across somewhat similar occupations and occupation communities.<sup>4</sup> This approach means that the paper does not dwell on the specifics of different occupation campaigns within or across countries. Instead, it focuses on common themes that can be extrapolated from the specific contexts in which they arise in order to draw some general lessons that can be potentially applied later to other occupation contexts.

### **What is an occupation and how does it shape activist enthusiasm?**

Occupations, also referred to as protest or squatter camps, are characterized by the unauthorized entry, forceful holding, and long-term encampment in a public or private space with the goal of challenging power and seeking social, political, and/or cultural change.

As a form of protest, occupations are a tactical choice, that is, a strategic means of coercion or persuasion through which movements pursue their goals vis-à-vis other strategic actors (Jasper 2006; Piven and Cloward 1977; Mc Adam 1983; Ganz 2009; Gould 2009). They are nonetheless a peculiar tactical choice.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike marches and rallies, which last at the most a few hours and involve a steady stream of participants, occupations entail the construction of a “place-based social movement strategy that involves both acts of ongoing protest and acts of social reproduction needed to sustain daily life (Feigenbaum et al 2013: 12).” The result is the generation of “free/ autonomous” spaces where networks of individuals and organizations that support change come together intimately and for extended periods of time, developing in the process movement structures, rituals, ideas, and events, that is, a movement community (Staggenborg 1998, Polletta 1999, Taylor and Van Dyke 2004).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Argentina, Chile and Uruguay share some commonalities that make the cases comparable. They have high levels of economic development and urbanization by Latin American standards and strong traditions of left-leaning student party organization, and similar recent political regime trajectories, having made a transition from conservative military dictatorship to democracy during the 1980s and sustained democracy since then.

<sup>5</sup> Although it is not the topic of this paper, it is worth pointing out that the literature on social movements offers a number of explanations for why people choose to protest in particular ways. These include the existence of familiar and easily adaptable cultural repertoires that protestors can borrow from the past or other movements (Tarrow 1994; Tilly 1995), the opportunities and constraints imposed by institutions, other actors, and structural conditions (McAdam 1983; Tarrow 1994; Tilly 1995), the strategic goals of movements (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Manzano 2008), and the emotional and moral meaning of certain forms of collective action (Jasper 1997; Doherty 1999; Gould 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Network theorists use the term subcultural or communitarian action field to refer to the same idea (Diani and Mishe 2015: 314-15).

Occupations are forms of protest especially likely to generate strong movement communities. This is the case because occupations' prolonged face-to face interactions within a confined, autonomous, and high risk context tend to nurture intense affective bonds between participants (Zibechi 1997 and 2003: 142-3; Della Porta and Gianni Piazza 2008: 92-6; Ondetti 2008: 114; Hughes 2011; Castells 2012: 10-2; Della Porta 2012: 268-74; Feigenbaum et al. 2013; Hammond 2013). These bonds are forged by "being there," bearing together the risks of the struggle (Zibechi 2003:141).

Occupations form strong movement communities in more indirect ways as well (Zibechi 1997; Da Silva Catela 2005; Wittman 2005; Alvarez 2008; Castells 2012; Della Porta and Gianni Piazza 2008; Meyer and Chaves 2008; Ondetti 2008; Castell 2012; Gitlin 2012; Taussig 2012; Feigenbaum, Frenzel and MCurdy 2013; Perrugoria and Tejerina 2013; de la Llata 2015; Gould-Wartofsky 2015; Sigaud 2015). First, they activate and connect networks, serving as nodes of communication that allow activists to influence each other, helping diffuse the forms and content of protest (Della Porta 2012; Tindall 2015: 235-6). In other words, occupations are "activist hubs: widening, strengthening and uniting social movements (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006)."

Second, occupations generate relatively stable political, social and cultural structures. Sustaining an occupation involves a number of challenges, including: securing the occupation from police attacks, meeting the food, shelter, and even entertainment needs of participants, making strategic and tactical movement decisions, avoiding movement isolation and loss of (social and/or traditional) media attention, and preventing member cooptation and desertion. Efforts to confront these challenges require in turn the development of an on-site organization structure and culture, that is, shared social norms, including rules for everyday cohabitation and decision-making, language, symbols, rituals, principles and values (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995; Gould 2009; Della Porta 2012; Routledge 2015; Tindall 2015: 238).

Third, occupations offer activists unusual spaces of collective empowerment. Built almost from scratch and in the heat of the struggle, social movement culture and organization develops as a result of constant on-site deliberation, negotiation, and enactment. Such processes contribute in turn to generate among participants an acute sense of "permanent" collective engagement and agency (Polletta 2002; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004; Della Porta 2015; Routledge 2015: 291). They also generate organization, culture, and politics that operate as the living embodiment of the change the movement pursues (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006; Taylor et al. 2009; Howard and Pratt-Boyden 2013; Van Sande 2013). In doing so, occupations offer living examples of plausible alternative forms of power relations, in some cases leading to the creation of more permanent countercultures (McAdam 1994; Melucci 1996; Rochon 1998; Ranis 2006; Haenfler 2013; Sbicca and Perdue 2014; Della Porta 2015; Routledge 2015: 391-2; Vasudevan 2015).

All this contributes to the strong politization of collective identities and the development of shared counterhegemonic discourses, providing meaning

through which movement members can bridge individual and organizational differences, draw boundaries and establish alliances (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004: 268; Gould 2009; Della Porta 2012; Ramadan 2012; Routledge 2015: 391). In this way, occupations are likely to strengthen what Taylor et al. (2009) call oppositional consciousness and collective identity (Sbicca and Perdue 2014).

Occupation communities are, however, not devoid of tension. Some of these tensions stem from the fact that more committed, previously organized activists, may try to shape community culture in ways that clash with contents and processes that arise more spontaneously from the on-site experience itself. For example, attempts to generate more formal movement structures, take over leadership, or provide top-down political education, may clash with more horizontal, anti-establishment occupation practices (Triguboff 2008; Salter and Boyce Kay 2011; De Vore 2015; Gould-Wartofsky 2015). Others result from ideological, philosophical, or strategic differences among different movement groups participating in the occupation (Wittman 2005; Della Porta and Piazza 2008; Aitchison 2011). Others arise over issues of cohabitation, involving, for example, hygienic practices, excessive drinking, violence, idleness, free riding, and stealing (Da Silva Catela 2005; Taussig 2012: 63). Yet, others emerge from occupations' reproduction of class, gender, and racial inequality, and even authoritarian national political traditions (Gould-Wartofsky 2015; Núñez 2011); or differences in cultural style between different groups partaking in the occupation (Aguilera 2006). Finally, occupations can turn into ghettos and unwelcoming spaces of deliberation, dominated by those with more resources and/or commitment (Hodkinson and Chatterton 2006: 312).

The social movement literature suggests that tactical choice has significant effects on the trajectory and relative success of social movements (Mac Adam 1983; Tilly 1995; Amenta 2006; Taylor et al 2009).<sup>7</sup> In particular, it points out that the form and character of protest and its interaction with the broader economic, political and attitudinal context affect the prospects of social movements (Gamson 1975; Piven and Cloward 1977; McAdam 1983; Tarrow 1994; Tilly 1995; Almeida and Brewster 1998; Amenta 2005 and 2006; Cress and Snow 2000; Hassan and Staggenborg 2015; Beckwith 2016). This scholarship has yielded a rich analysis of, for example: how movement and targets' tactical innovation and adaptation shapes, in a chess-like fashion, the pace of mobilization (McAdam 1983), how the relative policy success of certain tactical choices depends on their fit with the context (Amenta 2006), how protest contributes to the development of movement identities, solidarity and community that ensure movement survival over time (Fantasia 1988;

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<sup>7</sup> This is mediated by activist interpretation. Polletta (2006) argues, for example, that how movement communities remember and recount their struggle can mobilize participants, attract support, and influence targets. In particular, she points out to the power of story-telling, that is, conventional folk narratives that offer dramatic characters and sequences of events, linking the emotional and moral appeal of movement stories, and offering plausibility and coherence, to movements' relative success.

Staggenborg 1998; Della Porta 2012) or lead to the radicalization and division of movements (Della Porta 1995; Cross and Snow 2011), and how the novelty, militancy, variety, size and cultural resonance of protest shapes the effectiveness of mobilization (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004: 278-83).

What is less developed is a theoretical understanding of how protest impacts activists at a personal or individual level.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, existing studies on the topic tend to focus on the effect of protest on the **future** biographical or generational trajectory of those that partake in it, devoting little attention to how protest affects activists' during protest (Guigni 2004; McAdam 2004; Bosi et al 2016). In particular we don't have enough understanding about how specific forms of protest affect activist enthusiasm, that is, the degree to which activists feel excited and actively interested in the movement they are participating in. This is an important gap since enthusiasm very likely has significant effects on activist involvement, and thus is probably another important factor behind the strength and scope of protest movements.<sup>9</sup> Understanding this dynamic would, therefore, contribute to enriching our knowledge of the mechanisms behind the trajectory of social movements during protest cycles.

To make some progress in this direction this paper explores how occupation communities are socially and ideationally constructed by activists and how such constructions affect members' perceptions of their occupation experiences, ultimately affecting their enthusiasm for the movement. This approach reflects the contemporary preoccupation of social movement theory with emotions, a topic that has been gaining traction in the field in recent years (Jasper 2011). Such studies show how different emotions have important consequences on activist involvement in social movements, the trajectory and intensity of mobilization, the means of protest, the radicalization of activists, and also the creation of movement solidarity, rituals, and group dynamics (Goodwin et al. 2001; Jasper 2011). This paper's findings contribute to this literature by suggesting that occupation experiences generate complex and contradictory feelings, affecting participants' enthusiasm about the movement in dialectical ways.

## **Occupations and activist enthusiasm**

As I mentioned in the introduction, accounts of recent student mobilization campaigns in the southern cone suggest that occupations affect student participants in major ways. What aspects of occupations generated enthusiasm in activists during the heat of mobilization? and why?

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<sup>8</sup> In contrast, there is an ample literature that focuses on the personal or individual factors that account for participation in protest, including attitudinal and psychological determinants, activists' socialization, and biographical availability and embeddedness in movement networks (McAdam 2004: 490).

<sup>9</sup> For an exception, see Hammond (2013) work on Occupy Wall Street.

Across the different interviews analyzed in this paper, a common theme was, as a former activist well put it, a sense that occupying entailed “unique living experiences of communion with others (...) it is unreal, you are suspended from normal life, it’s like there is an outside but there is an inside where all things are happening (Huerta, Chilean activist).” Interviewees in the three countries referred to this experience as “convivencia,” or coexistence in English (Huerta; Martínez, Argentinean activist; and Matías, Uruguayan activist)

The bonds that formed such coexistence or communion had complex and multilayered meanings for participants.<sup>10</sup> At one level the community formed in occupations was one of friendship. In the words of an interviewee, occupations create “ties among people new to each other, it is something different in that it opens possibilities of friendship that would not exist otherwise (Matías).” The basis of such community arise from a somewhat spontaneous but intense “self-chosen” sense of responsibility, loyalty, and commitment toward other participants, forged to a great degree in the difficulties and risks of camp life. As an interviewee recalled, “someone suggested we closed our eyes and ask ourselves if we were willing to take the risk [and occupy] and everybody said yes. So we started six days of living in community, of feeling deeply committed to one another, of taking care of each other. That intense sense of friendship, even with people I did not know that much (...) I’ve never felt the same way again (Mellano, Argentinean activist).” It also arises from the sense of coming together to do something of social and political relevance. As the same interviewee described it, “the act of occupying felt super important, it felt as if we were coming together for an epic deed, like a fellowship (Mellano).” Referring to her own experience occupying schools, an activist echoed this point, stating that in occupations students felt they had come “*codo a codo* (side by side in English) to fight for a noble cause (Martínez).”

These sentiments were not simple abstractions. They were validated by actions in which participants put themselves at risk to protect their comrades, and events that dramatized how each participants’ fate depended on the protest community at large. Evoking the first night of an occupation, another activist pointed out: “[it] was hard. They tried to evict us but we fought back with stones. We learned the next day, that in the Zorrilla [another high school occupied that night] the police had grabbed a student, but his comrades had rescued him” (Alvarez, Uruguayan activist). For other activists, friendship stemmed instead from the pleasure derived in genuine closeness and fun. As an interviewee recalled, “we had our clandestine radio on the top of the building to transmit what was going on inside. It was incredible, we had a large audience and lots of fun (...) up there we threw some chorizo on the grill, chatted, had an amazing time with friends. Everything was so fresh and genuine (Cossia, Uruguayan activist).” These feelings generated a landscape of enthusiasm that

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<sup>10</sup> For an interesting analysis of how the socio-economic characteristics of the student population are associated with differences in participants’ ideational constructions of the movement and occupation experiences see Alvarez (2008).

bonded participants through a complex blend of duty, pleasure, thrill, and hardship.

Occupations were, however, also understood by students as a political community of free self-governing equals. As a student activist expressed, “the occupation was an autonomous space outside of the sovereignty of parents and authorities. It was by osmosis a political space (...) you couldn’t escape it, we talked about politics all the time. It was an exercise in self-government (Vielmas, Chilean activist).” Central to this type of community were practices of horizontal deliberation and direct mechanisms of participation in decision-making, conceptualized by students as bottom-up democracy. This lent the movement legitimacy. As an activist recalled, for example, “we occupied with the certainty that it was the right thing to do because the occupation had a democratic origin (Soto, Chilean activist).” Horizontal political practices also provided feelings of empowerment and political engagement. According to a participant “Occupations were spaces of permanent deliberation in the sense of both political theoretical debate and everyday democratic decision-making. They were the greatest instance of movement struggle: you ask yourself questions, connect with others, and take risks, without anyone telling you what to do (Thea, Argentinean activist).” Thus, as another activist remarked, occupations were experienced by participants as “an inversion of power and a feeling of being free for the first time (Valenzuela, Chilean activist).” This made a powerful impression on participants who “felt very young, very new (...) but were witnesses to the potency of our own actions (Soto).”

To work in everyday life, this community needed some structures. These contributed to the formation of a community defined by its own cultural codes, which helped generate in turn cultural and aesthetic identification and strengthen a sense of “we-ness.” According to one activist, “The occupation had its rites, norms, and symbols, from the colors that we used and what we did, it all reflected our desire for unity (Cossia).” A lot of that was created on-site, a result of activists’ “leisure and excitement (Huerta)”. At the same time innovation and creativity reflected the idiosyncratic, pre-existing, mix that individuals and organizations brought to the site. One activist pointed out, for example, that “The thing with occupations is that they reflect the people who are in them. Ours was very countercultural, punk. But different schools had their own thing (Matias).”

Occupations were cultural communities, in another sense as well. They constituted living moral communities that embodied desired normative values, and allowed participants to live an alternative moral world. Activists pointed out that during occupations they felt “[that they were] in permanent action, there is no hallway politics and obscure theory (Fader, Argentinean activist).” Hence, participation in the movement is “not only about the demands, it is about the process, about living politics the way you want and seeing that that is possible (Matías).” This creates unforgettable experiences of political and moral socialization. As an activist put it “At that age, occupations make a huge moral



impact on you. They shape who you are as a person. You sort of become the movement (Ramírez, Chilean activist).”

The growth of social media has allowed for rapid sharing of these positive experiences, contributing to the diffusion of enthusiasm beyond the site. As an interviewee argued, “people were creating stuff in the schools and then putting it up on photologs, so students in other schools would see it. Some came and visited, even joined, others decided to occupy their own school (...) it was all so cool that no one wanted to be left out (Seguel, Chilean activist).” As an activist pointed out “we could see what was going on in other occupations, it felt like, even if they were very different, we knew them and we recognized ourselves in them. It was incredible” (Seguel).

In sum, occupations generated emotional and cognitive bonds that created a uniquely empowering political, moral and cultural community of friends, which appealed to student activists beyond ideology and allowed for building solidarity across groups and individuals. This enthused students, generating positive feelings about the movement and their own involvement in it, contributing to legitimize the movement.

### **Occupations and activist disillusionment**

Some occupation features, however, challenged the construction, and even the very idea, of a strong protest community by casting doubt on its authenticity, and thus dampening activists’ enthusiasm about it.

First, occupations have no clear time lines, the occupation is supposed to be over once success is achieved. Hence, occupations involve member commitment to the movement for the duration of conflict, whatever its length. Yet, as it drags on, protest can dampen participant commitment and enthusiasm. As an activist described it, “there are risks, and when you bear risks permanently, it’s exhausting (...) You can’t live with those fears for very long (Ramírez).” Thus, extended occupations became “consuming (E. González, Chilean activist)” and “anti-climatic (Alvarez).” This generated a situation of “gradual exhaustion (Alvarez),” where activists feel “it is impossible to continue, but to give in is to fail (Alvarez),” and where they do not know “what we were going to do (Alvarez).” Because, as an activist argued, “at some point people want to just go on with their lives,” or another pointed out, “some people were worried about losing the academic year, or being expelled, and you know, for those that were poor it meant going to a bad school (Seguel)”. Thus, the problem for occupation leaders becomes one of “how to manage hopelessness (Soto)”.

Second, occupations are almost entirely self-regulated. Yet, as an activist pointed out “when you have one hundred kids sleeping together, without control, problems of every kind are bound to happen (Thea).” In every occupation, “there is always a sizable group that wanted to party and see the school as a hotel (Vielmas).” Former student leaders reported that although they usually created a dry law in the end they could not “stop the smuggling of alcohol (Mlynarz, Chilean activist).” Problems aggravated as days passed by,

and boredom started to sink in (Soto and Valenzuela, both Chilean activists). The challenge for student leaders “was how to avoid those problems from delegitimizing the occupation (Thea).” As an activist recalled “The first two days were tortuous: people were de-regulated, power was so close, and there were no ways for managing divergence (...) we had to make up everything from scratch, build structures (Soto).” As another interviewee pointed out “we felt we had to validate the [occupation] space (...) that we had to take care and not destroy it, and to do that we had to be creative and edgy, that is why art was key to the occupations (Huerta).”

Attempts to reign in disorder had, however, some unintended consequences for the formation of occupation communities. According to student leaders, such efforts contributed at key times to diluting political commitment, dividing occupation members, and self-imposing more rigid structures destined to monitor and regulate behavior (Thea and Vielmas). This in turn detracted from the movement self-image described in the previous section, and therefore was actively or passively resisted by students. Hence, ironically, as an activist put it “the very structures you form end up defeating activists (Matías).”

Third, occupations isolate activists from the larger society. According to an interviewee “the problem with occupations is that you turn inwards. You go like ‘society is so shitty that we are going to build our own micro-society’ (Matias).” They also “hide the movement” from the outside (Valenzuela). By turning inwards, occupations not only become less able to and perhaps even less willing to capture more members or a larger audience, but also become focused on internal conflict. The latter can contribute to drag on weak occupations and, as described below, turn off some participants. As an interviewee argued, “There were so many fights (...) at some point there was no more steam, but we just had to keep going on automatic pilot (Mellano).” In the words of another activist “We thought that after authorities agreed to some important demands, there was no point in going on: you never get everything you want. We were just going to weaken ourselves. We needed to pause and regroup before we self-imploded (Mellano).” From the outside, the persistence of the movement can thus be cast by opponents not as a sign of commitment and righteousness, but as a sign of recalcitrance and misunderstanding of the movement’s context, or hidden political agendas. An activist pointed out, for example, “the mayor pointed at us and said: hey they are still occupying because they are manipulated by the communists, or hey they are just skipping class, schools are becoming whore and party houses. Surveys showed that some people bought that message (Vielmas).”

Fourth, occupations entail internal conflict and power struggles, and run the risk of even reproducing the power relations of the outside.<sup>11</sup> With regard to deliberation, for example, as moderates viewed it, some occupations “developed into crazy, disorganized situations, where some small radical groups captured

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<sup>11</sup> For a reflection on how less democratic traditions and national political shortcomings are reproduced inside occupations see Núñez’ (2011) essay about Argentina.

discussion and made people feel alienated and a bit scared of speaking their mind (Mellano).” Some participants, pointed out that they “did not like the more aggressive ‘ultra’ line of the people that ended up being in charge of discussion. They drowned out the voices of the reasonable people. It was madness and I wasn’t sure I wanted to be a part of that (Vielmas).” Even more radical activists felt that “the logic of domination does not stay out of the assembly (E. González).” Participants decried also how occupations reproduced traditional gender and family roles. Recalling an occupation, a Chilean student activist stated that “the occupation context was pretty conservative, I mean moms’ brought the food (Vielmas).” Similarly, a female former activist recalled “there are all these norms of how women are supposed to behave.” This, and other similar contradictions, generated sentiments of disillusionment and feelings that “[the movements’] so-called direct democracy was not so democratic (Valenzuela).”

In sum, the lack of time lines, the self-regulating character of occupations, and internal conflict and power relations contributed to divisions and factionalism within occupations, ironically producing what some activists thought was less democracy, a feeling that contributed to disillusion and exhaustion.

### **Taking stock**

Occupation communities are socially and culturally constructed in everyday practices and interactions, and filled with ideational and emotional meaning. The interviews marshalled in this paper suggest that the identity and social features of such communities generate contradictory feelings, contributing to both fulfill and turn off activists, affecting their enthusiasm about the movements they are part of.

As suggested in the prior sections, occupations create unusually long-term contexts of shared risk, intimacy, autonomy, self-organization and deliberation that amplify and intensify collective action. This contributes to the creation of protest communities built on strong ties of love, solidarity, and morality. These ties bridge ideology, class, or other sociological characteristics, allowing activists to create and negotiate their own alternative anti-hegemonic identity, culture, and forms of self-government. Such an experience is seldom available in normal life and thus provides activists with intense feelings towards each other, and the sense that together they can effect change, giving democratic legitimacy to the movement. Embedded 24 hours, seven days a week, the individual merges with the collective, generating strong movement communities that students identify with and are drawn to.

Such a radically democratic community is, however, far from idyllic. Risk, intimacy, autonomy, self-organization and deliberation also amplify and intensify conflict, power struggles, and sentiments of fear and uncertainty. The enclosed character of occupations also helps to breed among some activists a sense of alienation from the outside and in some cases also an alienation from the inside. All this casts doubt on the democratic and liberating promises of the

occupation community, weakening group solidarity and moral commitment. When such fractures are visible to the exterior, they can also provide ammunition to state and counter-movements that challenge the movement's claims to legitimacy or coherence.

Occupations are, thus, inherently dialectical. The challenge for social movements is then how to counter occupation exhaustion and disillusionment, while helping to strengthen movement solidarity and maintaining the movement's momentum among activists. Building on the empirical material and secondary literature discussed in this paper, I end by suggesting some ways in which movement activists can overcome three important shortcomings of occupations: the reproduction of rigid mechanism of social control, isolation, and disorder and conflict.

The first suggestion is to encourage, not limit deliberation. It is true that in the long-term, occupations' excessive deliberation can at times become paralyzing and encourage capture of the leadership by vocal minorities. As Gould-Wartofsky (2015) well describes in his account of the US occupy movement, this not only breeds division, but also may lead to parallel offsite organization. The key is not so much the existence or not of deliberation but its dynamics and norms. Activists must heavily invest in forms of deliberation that are inclusive, and if not rigid or formal, have some institutionalized way of coming up with at least temporary consensus about structures and institutions that different occupation groups can live with. This type of deliberation may be an important tool to prevent the take-over of the occupation by particular groups and/or its development into an unwelcoming space, as well as to build organization structures that are more flexible and a better fit with the community. Ironically, deliberation may also at times be an antidote to conflict. Remembering his own experience, a former activist argued "everybody talked and talked and I think that that helped you sometimes to see things differently, see the others' perspective" (Cossia).

This, of course, requires a culture of respect and love for the other. While this culture is an inherent potential of every occupation, it is only a potential. Thus, the second suggestion of this paper is to encourage on-site collective activity beyond the reproduction of life camp. Camps must be spaces of eclectic collective artistic, intellectual, and even economic production. It is in the doing, particularly when it reflects bottom-up identity, that collective solidarity and knowledge is built. Hence, while not necessary developing top-down planning, occupation leaders must open and sustain negotiated spaces for different groups' self-expression and encourage communication between the different forms of collective action that may arise in the camp, encouraging a healthy stream of collective creative activity. As an interviewee stated at its best "the occupation experience is about being with others, doing things with others (Huerta)." In other words, solidarity will emerge from the occupation's political praxis.

Finally, activists must avoid the isolation that may stem from creating encampment institutional enclosures that secure the occupation from police

infiltration or the entry of participants that lack any commitment to the movement. One way of doing this is to actively engage with the exterior, through social media and traditional media. This allows occupiers to connect with outside sympathizers or other occupiers or would be occupiers.<sup>12</sup> The combination of occupations and other repertoires of contention may also be a way to avoid isolation. The outside can become an escape valve for decompressing internal conflict and also help replenish creativity and enthusiasm. In addition, as an interviewee pointed out other repertoires, such as marches can “give visibility to occupations” (Fader).

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<sup>12</sup> A similar suggestion emerges from other works. See for example, Lubin 2012 analysis of Occupy Wall Street and Theocharis 2011 analysis of student occupations.

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*Includes information concerning period as student activist*

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Indira Palacios is assistant professor of political science at Missouri State University. Her research focuses on social movements in Latin America's southern cone, in particular women, labor, and more recently students. She is interested in issues pertaining to movement diffusion, repertoires of protest, and outcomes, and the interactions between movements and other social and political actors. She can be reached at [indirapalacios AT missouristate.edu](mailto:indirapalacios@missouristate.edu)