Occupy Los Angeles: democracy, space and loss at City Hall Park

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Abstract

Taking place in just two months, scholars have understood the "Occupy Los Angeles" cycle of protest in at least three ways. It has firstly been understood as a solidarity movement with Occupy Wall Street, protesting economic inequality and global financial institutions. (Calhoun 2013) Secondly, the movement has been understood as one event in a global wave of post-Cold War prefigurative protest going back to at least the 1994 Zapatista uprising. Lastly, the occupation has been understood as an illustration of a movement driven by social media. (Juris 2012) While all three are true, central to the movement narrative was the continued occupation of City Hall Park. This article examines unique ethnographic data collected during the occupation of Los Angeles City Hall Park in October and November of 2011 to demonstrate the centrality of geographic space in prefigurative movements. The social movements literatures on arenas (Jasper 2004), cycles (Tarrow 1993), and waves (Almeida 2003) educe three seasons of protest: movement rise, crest, and decline.

Keywords: social movements; occupy; ethnography; Los Angeles; arenas; solidarity.

On October 1, 2011, about a thousand people marched from Pershing Square to City Hall Park in downtown Los Angeles. Inspired by the encampment at Zucotti Park in New York City which began two weeks prior, Southern California activists established a tent city in Los Angeles City Hall Park[1] where they stayed until their eviction nine weeks later. City Hall Park is one square block surrounding Los Angeles City Hall. The group marched along sidewalks, carrying tents and banners from Pershing Square to City Hall Park, chanting familiar slogans about the 99% and their ownership of the streets. Orderly and in single file, in order to avoid arrest, activists grew somewhat less methodical once they arrived in the open park.

Occupy Los Angeles (OLA) during this period in the Fall of 2011 has been understood in at least three ways. It has firstly been understood as a solidarity movement with Occupy Wall Street (OWS).[2] The demands and tactics used by OWS activists, bringing attention to issues related to income inequality by

[1] Once popular with tourists, the park has since been landscaped to remove any areas for camping or assembly.

[2] Sometimes pejoratively called a "copycat" movement.

occupying a park, were nearly identical in the OLA encampment some two weeks later. OWS leveraged its geographic proximity to Wall Street's global finance capital firms. In contrast, the Los Angeles movement chose City Hall to facilitate popular expression against income inequality, while still weaving in resistance to finance capital through its support of the Zuccotti Park encampment.

Secondly, OLA has been understood as one event in a global wave of post-Cold War prefigurative protest going back to at least the 1994 Zapatista uprising. The occupy tactic has been used since at least the nineteen century, notably at the Paris Commune of 1871. The latest resurgence of the tactic may be placed, however, with the Zapatistas and the alter-globalization and Urban Zapatismo movements that have followed. The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), quickly turned away from a strategy of attempting to usurp state power and instead has focused on building autonomous structures at home and through its solidarity movements elsewhere. Soon after in 1999, what is now known as the alter-globalization movement began protesting international finance institutions beginning with the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference. Activists converged from a variety of global anti-capitalist movements to this singular location. The strategy was repeated on April 16, 2000 in Washington, DC to protest the joint meetings of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. The movement has since gone on to protest such varied targets as the Republican and Democratic National Conventions and the Vancouver Winter Olympics (c.f. Esparza & Price 2015). This time period has also seen prefigurative strategies in the World Social Forum (de Sousa Santos 2006), horizontalist movements during the Argentine economic crisis (Sitrin 2006), the M15 movement in Madrid (Castañeda 2012), as well as civil society uprisings in London, Greece, Santiago and Montreal.

OLA has lastly been understood as an illustration of a movement driven by social media. (Juris 2012) Social media has been credited for changing the speed and character of contemporary movements. Social media websites and smartphone applications have made it possible to communicate and mobilize thousands of activists far faster than phone trees or email chains. It has also made it possible for anyone with a smartphone to publicly share video and images with thousands of people in real time. The Occupy Los Angeles Facebook group was the largest geographical Occupy group behind New York and Boston. (Caren & Gaby 2011) The Occupy Los Angeles livestream was viewed by thousands of people and was a recruitment tool as well as a way to frame their message for the public. Social media has had similar effects on movements in the Arab Spring, in student movements in Chile, and in the proliferation of the "flash mob" repertoire in youth movements in places such as Belarus and elsewhere, in which activists flood a space to do a coordinated musical and/or dance routine. (Shukan 2008)

While OLA was all three of these, central to the movement narrative was the continued occupation of City Hall Park. Activists renamed the park "Solidarity Park," to reflect the desired relationship among different kinds of activists

present in the movement and also to express solidarity with the occupation in New York. This repertoire of reclaiming public space through the symbolic name change travels through the same channels that the diffusion of the occupation tactic itself travelled, from the Zuccotti Park encampment to its satellite and support movements throughout the country and abroad. The space was opened up to community groups and local activist groups to set up tables and booths for a wide range of issues including advocates for the homeless, mental health services, environmental groups, communist and socialist organizations, food distribution booths, a library, a concert space, and child care services.

This article illustrates the centrality of geographic space throughout the OLA movement cycle by applying the social movements literatures on arenas (Jasper 2004), cycles (Tarrow 1993), and waves (Almeida 2003) to unique ethnographic data collected during the occupation of Los Angeles City Hall Park in October and November of 2011. Three seasons of protest are apparent: movement rise, crest, and decline, consistent with similar treatments of social movements.

I outline the dominant cycles of protest schema, illustrating both spatial and philosophical social imaginaries[3] at each stage that drive utopian possibility at the inception, cement success at the crest, and drive destructive tactics amidst demise. The movement's initial deployment in the first weeks of October 2011 contained broad, idealistic social themes. Once the movement's resonance with the broader public reached its crest in late October and early November, these ideas approached a crisis as competing visions vied for influence at General Assembly and constituent committee[4] meetings. Nearing the end of the physical occupation of City Hall Park on November 30, a scripted conclusion excluded all but those social imaginaries consistent with a prefigurative narrative of the occupied space. Central to my conclusions is the methodological focus on spatially and temporally bounded movement cycles.

Arenas

Physical space is a precondition for contention of any sort. (Haug 2013; Jasper 2015) Jasper's (2004; 2021) concept of the arena is instructive in demarcating the rise, crest, and fall of the physical space in which contention took place. Jasper has variously defined the arena as "*physical places where players interact to generate decisions and other outcomes*" (emphasis in original, 2021) and "sets of resources and rules that channel contention into certain kinds of actions and offer rewards and outcomes." (2004) In both the literal and metaphoric sense of the arena, Los Angeles at City Hall Park served as both

[3] Borrowing from the anti-modernist concept outlined by Charles Taylor (2002), which can also be thought of a type of "non-relational diffusion" in contentious politics terms (c.f. Tarrow & McAdam 2005).

[4] One of the more prominent of these committees later became the "anti social media" committee.

office space and public space, allowing the movement to incubate ideas and carry out actions.

Intramodal movement cycles, or the life cycle of a particular tactic, action or strategy within the larger series of these constituting the movement, are animated endogenously by individuals. The bounded time and space containing the physical occupation of City Hall Park constrained resonant repertoires and narratives to the occupation repertoire.

Cycles & waves

Social movement cycles and waves are usually understood as a rise and fall in the number of movement events, victories, participants, or the number of media articles about the movement over some period of time. (Alemeida 2008; Tarrow 1993) This becomes consequential when considering the kinds of effects these waves and cycles might have on related movement characteristics. Cycles and tactics may be structurally linked, Tarrow argues, with a movement's most populist tactics being performed at the peak and more radical ones at the beginning and end. (Tarrow 1993)

Tarrow (1993) discusses the peak of protest waves as creative moments, where new and old forms of contention combine with each other to form new ideas. The peaks of the cycles have increased contention, more diffusion of ideas across space and across protest sectors, more organizations, an expanded vocabulary of rhetoric, a wider diversity of tactics. Tarrow and McAdam (2005) distinguish between two processes, relational and non-relational diffusion, both of which involve certain mechanisms for them to function: attribution of similarity; emulation; and coordinated action. Vasi reviews the literature on non-relational diffusion to explain that many actors arrive to a protest site after consuming media.[5] (2011)

Political opportunities, such as institutional access and competitive elections, can initiate a protest wave, as measured by the number of political organizations. The number of civic groups, the number of their events, and attendees may all increase during these time periods. Political threat, such as economic decline, the erosion of rights, and repression, can also lead to protest wave decline.[6] Already-existing activist groups may feel threatened and become politically or ideologically more radical. (Almeida 2003) Social movements rise and fall as states respond to movement challenges and alter the opportunities available to contemporary and subsequent movements. (Meyer 1993)

[5] For a review of relational diffusion, see McAdam, Doug, and Dieter Rucht. 1993. "The Cross-National Diffusion of Movement Ideas." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528(1):56-74.

[6] Repression has paradoxically been found to both motivate movements and to precipitate their decline. See for example, Chang, Paul Y. 2008. "Unintended Consequences of Repression: Alliance Formation in South Korea's Democracy Movement (1970–1979)." *Social Forces* 87(2):651-77.

Movements rise and fall in numbers and their tactics tend to fluctuate somewhat as well – both have been fodder for theorizing. Rising movements can spin-off ancillaries, perhaps explaining movement rise. (McAdam 1995; Meyer & Whittier 1994)

The study of radical action is split among the social movements, terrorism,[7] and revolutions research fields. Political threat and its resulting radicalization are thought to increase waves of activity within each of these. Radical flanks (Haines 1984) in particular have been observed to arise after the demobilization of large mass movements. However, radicalization can also lead to certain destabilizing dynamics within those organizations, leading to decline. (McCormick 2003; Deutsch & Shichman 1986; Gurr 1990; Crenshaw 1992; Braungart & Braungart 1992)

Even while movement activities ebb, they engage in activities that hold them in abeyance during low periods in the movement cycle. (Taylor 1989). Movements continue to be active, regardless of their relationship to or effect on the state. (Morris & Herring 1984). Relationships and spill-overs from one movement to another illustrate dynamic processes that occur, and that movements are social processes that move for meso-theoretical reasons, and that these reasons are even more important than those contained in macro cycles or political opportunities. (Meyer & Whittier 1994) It is not so much that cycles do not exist, but rather, they are not sufficient to explain.

Indeed, Tarrow conceded that,

> Students of history recognize cycles in various forms: reform cycles, electoral cycles, generational cycles, economic cycles. Yet empirical studies of political cycles rarely go beyond these generic classifications and seldom escape their putative dependence on economic fluctuations. (1993, p.284)

This is particularly true since the scale of the cycles literature tends to focus on event-count data over multiple movements (Rasler & Thompson 2009) but also appear in more nuanced arguments. (c.f. Alemeida 2008)

Methods

This article is based on two months of ethnographic fieldwork in downtown Los Angeles taking place in October and November of 2011 and the analysis of declassified FBI reports, Los Angeles Times coverage, and primary source materials produced by activists themselves such as leaflets and websites. City Hall Park is conveniently equidistant from my university campus and my neighborhood, allowing me to visit the location twice daily during my weekday

[7] Waves are used extensively in the study of terrorism as well. Rapoport argues for distinct time periods, each with their own set of tactics and ideologies, that define separate terrorist cycles. (Rapoport 2001; Rasler & Thompson 2009)

bus commute. I also visited the field site at least once each weekend. While I spent dozens of hours at the field site and attended several meetings, I did not speak in any of these meetings except to identify myself as a researcher. The analysis is based primarily on my longform handwritten fieldnotes. I did not conduct any formal interviews. I did have dozens of short, informal conversations throughout my time there. I do not identify any activist here by name. Elected officials and other public figures are identified. I was deliberate about walking around the entire park with each visit to identify changes in participant demographics and other visible changes to the environment. While many participants spent the nights in tents at City Hall Park, I chose to sleep at home. The conclusions I reach here are based on direct observation of activist events as they took place. I had lived in Los Angeles for two months before the occupation began and have lived in Los Angeles ever since.

In coding my fieldnotes, I identified this two-month time period into three components typical in the social movement literature on "waves" or "cycles" of protest – emergence, crest, and decline (Robnett, et. al. 2015). Rather than treat the occupation solely in movement terms, I treat it also as a "vivid political event" for participants in street protest. (Fillieule 2012), I want to treat Occupy as a space where people, previously and otherwise socialized, expressed those already-formed dreams.

Here I focus rather narrowly on the rise and fall of an occupation of a physical space, interpreting these three stages within this timeframe. The conclusions I reach here are based on direct observation of activist events as they took place. I have lived in the City of Los Angeles for over 10 years, providing me with contextual information.

I gathered ethnographic field notes taken from the initial rally at Pershing Square on 1 October 2001, the march to City Hall Park, and the occupation of the park lasting through the end of the month. I observed General Assembly and committee meetings located at the park. I present here the endogenous factors leading to the emergence, peak, and decline of the occupation of the park. As a city affected by gentrification during the intervening ten years, I contextualize this short-lived eruption within contemporary dynamics.

In addition to understanding the fluctuation in movement numbers and activity, the study takes an inductive approach to identify the texture of this movement cycle. I document the movement, its activities, and grievances across the movement cycle. Movement activities and attitudes change over the course of a movement cycle. Further, these activities and attitudes propel and constrain movement dynamics, tactics, and outcomes.

I have taken care not to identify any individuals by name, except for elected public officials. The OLA movement did not begin on October 1 and did not end on November 30, 2011. I have chosen to begin and end the analysis where I have in order to highlight the life cycle of the physical occupation of City Hall Park. The broader Occupy Movement included cities across the United States as well as several online activities. I focus primarily on the activities of Occupy Los

Angeles. Some activists occupied Pershing Square prior to the start of the occupation of City Hall Park. I have also chosen to focus primarily on the main occupation located in Los Angeles, making only a few sojourns to related activities in Bunker Hill, the LA Metro, and elsewhere. These results should be interpreted accordingly. I have not considered economic factors leading to this emergence. (Goodwin 2012) I have not done so because although we do see efflorecences of movements during times of economic crisis, neither does this explanation account for variability within this pattern. Neither have I considered the election cycle (Goldstone 2004), the occupation having taken place between the 2010 midterm election and the 2012 re-election of US President Barak Obama.

Occupy Los Angeles

The OLA encampment practiced a culture of direct democracy and individual autonomy. The encampment was managed by a General Assembly, which met each night of the occupation. This General Assembly operated using modified forms of the classic consensus decision-making process that has become the norm for many youth movements since the protest waves of the 1960's. [8] Some movement participants had been gathering during evening meetings in Pershing Square prior to the occupation of City Hall Park.

The movement published documents in print and online on how to conduct business at their "People's Assemblies." One of the central documents, "The Principles of Solidarity," was adopted directly from OWS. It begins,

On September 17, 2011, people from all across the United States of America and the world came to protest the blatant injustices of our times perpetuated by the economic and political elites. On the 17th we as individuals rose up against political disenfranchisement and social and economic injustice.

These tenets came to define a major faction of OLA. OLA also held workshops for incoming members to train them on consensus procedures and on other matters pertaining to the committee structure and governance of the liberated space. Many of these policies and structures were imported wholesale and translated from the original Puerta del Sol Protest Camp in Madrid, central to the Spanish M15 Movement, also known as Los Indignados. Physical copies of these and other primary source materials were available in stacks at a Welcome tent that had been set up, or at other locations in the encampment. The document illustrates the specific prefigurative discourse under which it operates.

Describing the deliberative process in people's assemblies, the document promotes "Collective Thinking," stating that "Collective Thinking is diametrically opposed to the kind of thinking propounded by the present

[8] For a much more detailed description of the specific language and gestures used at the OLA General Assembly see Lila Steinberg, R. 2014. "The Occupy Assembly." *Journal of Language & Politics* 13(4):702-31.

system." It suggests a libertarian socialist[9] ideology of democratic governance, stating that people who do not agree with decisions "are not obligated to carry it out." This position both created the possibility and the measured success of this movement and also set the stage for later fissures which I will describe here.

Setting up camp

On the first night of the tent city encampment, the OLA General Assembly meeting was consumed by a debate as to whether to sleep in the park or to sleep on the sidewalks surrounding the park. Many activists had already set up their tents on the lawn, but many were concerned about the legality of their encampment since the park closed each night at 10:30 PM. Anyone remaining in the park could be at risk for arrest after the requisite warnings that the police must issue before doing so.

Camping on the sidewalks of Los Angeles is, on the other hand, legal. Many activists advocated that the group camp on the sidewalk for the night until they could obtain a permit or other permission from the city or police department to stay in the park. Most activists chose to sleep on the sidewalk, although some did sleep in the park. The police did not make any arrests at the site. This continued for a few days until City Council members Richard Alarcon and Bill Rosendahl introduced a resolution in support of the occupation on October 5. The resolution passed unopposed, granting the movement some temporary reprieve from the enforcement of park hours. This resolution read, in part,

> the City of Los Angeles hereby stands in SUPPORT for the continuation of the peaceful and vibrant exercise in First Amendment Rights carried out by 'Occupy Los Angeles[10]

Many movement activists advocated for a conciliatory relationship with the city and the police department. These activists wanted to avoid breaking any laws. At General Assembly meetings, these activists made persistent impassioned interventions to keep the group from taking on more radical tactics. The city council was permitting activists to occupy space legally and most wanted to maintain this status. Not everyone valued maintaining a positive relationship with the police, some having experienced police repression in their communities or in previous movement participation in Los Angeles. These varied experiences splintered into competing social imaginaries, which later manifested themselves into spatial divisions between activists. During a committee meeting on October 2nd, one activist that chose to camp in the park expressed to the group that she had been harassed and threatened by members of the movement who disagreed

[9] For a review, see Dolgoff's (1980) compilation of Bakunin's works.

[10] Los Angeles City Council. 2011. "File No. 09-0234-S1: First Amendment Rights / Occupy Los Angeles / Responsible Banking Measure." 5 Oct 2011.

with her choice. This occupier felt that this was not conducive to solidarity and that, evoking the philosophy of the Puerta del Sol statement, we should agree to disagree about tactics.

Those who were able and willing to sleep in the park seemed to express more knowledge about and commitment to global movements and radical ideologies in general. This created an environment that placed mostly young whites at the center of movement governance structures.[11] There was pressure expressed at General Assembly and committee meetings that emphasized the importance for activists to stay overnight in the park and to attend regular General Assembly meetings. This orientation is an outgrowth of ideologies of radical democracy,[12] but had the effect of alienating and excluding those that did not share or were otherwise unaware of this ideology.

In contrast, one principle of General Assembly meetings at OWS, OLA and other occupations was the "progressive stack." The queue to speak was managed in such a way that it privileged voices that had not yet spoken, women, and people of color. This form of affirmative action illustrates the willingness, at least in principle, to support the principles of diversity. In practice, however, the space itself was structured in such a way that more whites ended up participating, despite the progressive stack.

The idea of a progressive stack came from criticisms in the 1999/2000 alter-globalization movements in Seattle and Washington, DC. People of color criticized the whiteness of these movements and questioned the sincerity of activists who seemed to prioritize tourist activism over local organizing in their communities, (Esparza & Price 2015; Martinez 2000) and later critiqued the intentional targeting of minority populations to mobilize them for mostly white protest actions. (Rajah 2000) These activists instead advocated a return to local, grassroots empowerment that remains independent from national mobilizations or even NGOs. (Tang 2007)

There was also a significant number of religious groups and other older white cohorts during this first phase of the movement. These included Catholic groups, inter-faith organizations, and religious groups involved in homelessness and anti-war work. Secular older whites included 9/11 truth organizations, environmental groups, and those seeking to close the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Activists who were initially present in this phase are those who seemed to already be engaged citizens that weaved their own local and national issues into the occupy narrative. This was apparent from the density of leaflets

[11] This is consistent with the literature on biographical availability. See, for example Wiltfang, Gregory and Doug McAdam. 1991. "The Costs and Risks of Social Activism: A Study of Sanctuary Movement Activism. " *Social Forces* (69) 4 : 987–1010. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/69.4.987.

[12] Of the kind typically observed in prefigurative movements throughout the world. For a review, see Esparza, Louis Edgar. 2013. "Power and Authority in Social Movements : a Political Philosophy of Prefigurative Politics." Pp. 40-67 in *Partecipazione e conflitto*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

many of them carried, from their use of ironing boards as light-weight portable tables, and from t-shirts and buttons championing pet causes. The range of activists was enormous, including banners present from local Christian churches, tables set up by alternative political parties, single-issue groups from the environmental, anti-war, police brutality, and animal rights movements, those from the 9/11 Truth Movement, and others.

Government tolerance of this social experiment created a brief flash of expression that allowed activists to reconcile their prefigurative politics and their movement actions. The city yielded governance of park activities to the OLA General Assembly, giving activists a moment of control over public space. It also shifted some forms of conflict from the boardroom to the garden paths. Activists themselves had to work through issues related to the governance of the park in their own meetings. These discussions, along with the tactical disagreements more normally the "stuff" of movements, led to frequent conflict.

Occupy activists had a difficult time making meaningful links with long-time activists and community organizers that do not share the prefigurative ideology. Unions, urban housing organizers, homeless people's rights organizers, and others with long-term links to surrounding LA communities were at odds with the young, mostly-white anarchists at the core of Occupy governance.[13] Occupy organizers also had difficulty bridging the gap with organized ethnic communities less than a mile to the east, just across the Los Angeles River, or even just a few blocks to the south in Skid Row. Containing the largest stable homeless population in the United States, Skid Row, or the Central City East neighborhood of Los Angeles, then had a homeless population of between 4,000 and 5,000 people, a result of city policies that sought to centralize the large homeless population in the city.[14]

This philosophical difference became readily visible as activists divided themselves across different areas of the park. Older activists would typically distribute leaflets for various causes, especially alongside the sidewalk and walkways of the park. As I discuss in the following section, Occupy the Hood would eventually separate themselves to occupy the northern section of the park. The younger activists at the core of decision making generally resided in tents near the main entrance to City Hall on the southern end of the park. Activists used space as symbolic social imaginaries which articulated their own interests and also articulated the fissures forming in the movement.

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[13] Anarchist movements in the US are not always mostly-white. See, for example Williams, Dana M. 2015. "Black Panther Radical Factionalization and the Development of Black Anarchism." *Journal of Black Studies 46*(7): 678–703. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934715593053.

[14] While ethnographic approaches to the study of protest is appropriate to capturing the development of a movement, some of the broader observations about racial, tactical, and ideological differences between activists could have benefited from follow-up interviews with specific individuals. For thoughtful discussions about the barriers to transracial politics in Los Angeles, see Weide, Robert D. 2022. *Divide & Conquer: Race, Gangs, Identity, and Conflict*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Homelessness and police brutality departed somewhat from the Occupy issues that the movement promoted to the broader public, which revolve around homeowners' issues, student loan forgiveness, and economic inequality. However, because direct democracy allows for several issues to be represented, it was difficult to exclude issues and maintain any focus on externalized principles.

While the movement promoted its open structure, during my fieldwork activists at the encampment were unwilling to offer how the website was created, its management, or much information about funding. While available from resources outside of the encampment, some activists expressed frustration and became suspicious that there was certain information that did not leave the media tent except through privileged channels. Clear answers to these questions seemed lacking whether these requests came from individuals in committee meetings seeking transparency or from me directly asking individuals at the core of the movement. This secrecy parallels the paranoia present among other radical activists in the US and other developed nations. (Zwerman 1994; Zwerman, et. al. 2000)

The presence of drugs became a problem at the encampment and increasingly became a source of mainstream media attention. At least one incident of sexual assault was also reported to police. This increased the tension between activist factions under the occupy rubric who disagreed about how to handle these and other issues.

People come to the movement for their own reasons. Describing the Amsterdam squatter movement of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, Lynn Owens (2009) argues that "[p]eople invested in particular stories because they were invested in particular images of themselves and the movement." People come to occupation encampments with their own ideas about what should occur. The occupation of City Hall Park created a geographical space that allowed activists to express their personal and social imaginaries in a prefigurative space.

The crest

After the City Council resolution on Oct 5th in support of the occupation and public statements of support from Mayor Villarigosa, public sentiment and distinguished individuals began to engage and accept the occupy narrative in Los Angeles. One of the councilmembers seconding the resolution, Eric Garcetti, went on to become Mayor two years later in 2013. Some of the whereas clauses in the City Council resolution borrowed directly from movement language:

> WHEREAS, the causes and consequences of the economic crisis are eroding the very social contract upon which the Constitution that the United States of America was founded [...]; and
>
> WHEREAS, today corporations hold undue influence and power in our country, and the key to this power is the corporate claim to "personhood," [...]; and

WHEREAS, our economic system can only be called broken [...][15]

Nationally, the movement for the "ninety-nine percent," OWS and its satellite support movements seemed to have fulfilled its ambitions by opening the national dialogue and influencing its vernacular and some of its values. The strength of this public legitimacy in the nation and locally in the city of Los Angeles created a safety bubble around the encampment. The encampment became a tourist attraction with visitors milling through from out of town on the weekends and occupiers created a jubilant atmosphere with live music, silk screening, clothing swaps, dancing and activities. Booths and tents began to "dig in," creating a sense of permanence. The food kitchen, nurses' station, media tent, welcome station, and child care areas moved and expanded to meet the demand and the changing pressures. The fixed homeless population at the encampment increased as people saw a safe space being created for them just a few blocks north of Skid Row. New stations offering mental health, housing, and other services sprang up to accommodate the need at this location. Existing ad-hoc facilities became professionalized. The changed demographic from young and old whites to an encampment now including more Blacks and Latinos also changed the nature of discussions in committee meetings and at the General Assembly.

Disruptive tactics were not necessary at this stage in order to gain movement traction in the public discourse.[16] Activists insisting on the use of disruptive tactics found other targets. Some of these activists marched on large banking establishments around the city and engaged in cultural disruption on public transit.

Debates about taking the OLA movement to Bunker Hill, a district where many financial banks are located, led some OLA activists to march and protest at the downtown branch of Bank of America (BoA) and at other branches in and around downtown. OLA activists staged a number of actions at BoA branches, most notably the October 6 and November 17 protests and sit-in at the Bunker Hill BoA main branch where thousands participated. Activists attempted a number of tactics, including a sit-in at the branch and also an attempt to occupy a lawn with a tent city. In both cases, police promptly cleared activists out of those areas and arrested several.

OLA activists also "occupied" the city Metro system in early October. On October 2nd, hundreds of activists made their way to Union Station where activists were careful to follow the LA Metro Code of Conduct that prohibits excessive noise, loitering, and regulates solicitations and leafleting. They engaged in a collective action in stages, silently assembling on a platform, boarding a train, fanning out to distribute leaflets, and then only speaking when

[15] Ibid.

[16] Tilly explains that movement claims and performances change across both time and space. These repertoires of contention change as the movement wave moves along. (Tilly 2008)

spoken to. TransitTV, which produces news that is aired on televisions mounted onto the busses and other areas of the system, covered the event and included the action on its programming. On October 3, OLA activists engaged in a more traditional rally outside of the gates of a Metro station.

These subway protests continued into late October as documented by an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation in a declassified intelligence report obtained by the Partnership for Civil Justice Fund through a Freedom of Information Act request[17]:

> On 10-19-2011 a peaceful protest by the "Occupy Wall Street" movement occurred on a Blue Line train. [redacted] stated the protesters had all purchased tickets and were all cooperative. [redacted] is concerned however about what may happen if the "Occupy Wall Street" protesters mix with the more violent individuals upset about the alleged mistreatment of prisoners in the LASD [Los Angeles Sherriff's Department] jails.[18]

Those that left were quickly being replaced by new activists who were attracted to a more stable and safer environment that was sanctioned by the city. University professors began to send their students to the encampment for extra credit or on assignment to deliver surveys to occupiers. Some local professors also gave a series of free lectures on the weekends. Once the environment became more stable, newly arriving Black and Latino populations who had been exposed to police abuse began to question the movement's relationship with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). White activists who were interested in more disruptive tactics also began to return and speak out against police brutality.

Some also felt that the movement goals were not the most important goals for Black and Latino groups. Occupy the Hood, originating in New York, spread to the Los Angeles encampment and began holding their own General Assembly meetings and established their own committee structure. They began to decentralize the occupation, sending occupiers to other parts of the city, arguing that, "This movement is called Occupy Los Angeles not Occupy City Hall Park." This process accelerated when the main organizers of OLA, and eventually the most vocal within the General Assembly, effectively excluded concerns about police brutality in their communities,[19] feeling that the issue distracted from the message of economic justice.[20] (See also Ehrlich and Johnston 2012)

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[17] See Partnership for Civil Justice Fund. 2012. "FBI Documents Reveal Secret Nationwide Occupy Monitoring." Retrieved from: https://www.justiceonline.org/fbi_files_ows.

[18] Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2011. Intelligence Briefing. Retrieved from: https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/549516/fbi-spy-files-on-the-occupy-movement.pdf

[19] Dellacioppa, et. al. argue that members of OLA took up some of these issues in the months after they were forced out of City Hall Park. (2013)

[20] Economic justice messaging was a primary concern for many Occupy activists. (Juris 2012)

The Occupy the Hood movement in New York (OHNY) developed from a critique of the whiteness of the movement.[21] Occupy Harlem met first on October 28, mostly minority according to most accounts. They brought people from 'uptown,' most visibly a march in which NY City Council member Ydanis Rodriguez was arrested during an eviction of OWS on November 15. The People of Color caucus at OWS organized an event of Elders. Occupy the Hood Los Angeles (OHLA) broke off from OLA and began to hold their own General Assembly meetings. Working with local community action networks, OHLA brought OLA activists to minority neighborhoods around the city and encouraged the civic engagement of minority populations in the ideas of the occupy movement in their own neighborhoods in the city.

General Assembly meetings for OHLA were held earlier in the day, typically on the north end of City Hall Park. Organizers of OHLA were much more populated by Latinos and African Americans but was also much smaller, meetings consisted of generally between 30 and 100 people. Activists were also older and seemed to be involved in various other organizations. While there were people in OHLA who wanted to maintain friendly relationships with the police, attitudes toward police and police brutality were much more diverse than they were at OLA meetings.

One of the central motivating concerns for OHLA was police brutality in the city. Because the OLA GA had collaborated so closely with LAPD from the inception, many OLA activists wanted to maintain cordial relationships. This kept the issue of police brutality sidelined. OHLA was a way of addressing this among the other concerns about the centralization of the movement.

The stability of a legal platform from which to organize allowed for the movement to grow. At its crest, OLA was able to branch out into other parts of Los Angeles, organizing protests in the metro system and at nearby banks. OLA enjoyed popular press and visits from tourists, professors, and celebrities. This success gave way, however, as politicians and police grew weary of the occupiers, internal factions began to solidify, and press coverage began to sour.

Decline

These political threats led to political and ideological radicalization. The social imaginary also shifted from a politics of possibilities to an atmosphere of factionalism and conflict. While the crest of the movement saw a growth in the number of ideas, ideologies, and individuals, once these congealed into political factions, they constrained the range of possibilities[22] for movement actors.

[21] For a broader discussion of the whiteness of the Occupy movement in general, see Campbell, Emahunn Raheem Ali. 2011. "A Critique of the Occupy Movement from a Black Occupier." *The Black Scholar* 41(4):42-51.

[22] For more on the constrains of movement repertoires, see Tilly, Charles. 2008. *Contentious performances*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

As the movement gained in popularity at the crest, competing narratives draw the movement's resources and energy in different directions, thus consuming the movement. The libertarian socialist philosophy at the center of the movement, lacking the authority of a central committee or charismatic leader, allowed the movement to break up from within as actors followed their own preferred interests. This manifested itself in the various issue-based committees that formed during this period focusing on issues of education, diversity, gender, police brutality, and homelessness. This bricolage is a facet of prefigurative movements and a consequence of holding a static primary platform of economic justice and static primary tactic of land seizure. Held in balance with democratic governance practices, the movement's focus became increasingly indistinct. This occasionally functions well, as with, for instance, holding the values of education and gender diversity in tandem in OLA. It also, on occasion, does not work, as with OHLA breaking off from the main movement over issues of police brutality.

Demobilization is a decline in movement membership participation that is primarily a result of internal factionalism and external political pressure. (Lapegna 2013) Both of these threatened the stability and legality of the movement's occupation of City Hall Park.[23] Demobilization often sets in once a movement frame no longer resonates with the public and tactical repertoires are no longer effective. With the threat of police encroachment and a decline in positive press coverage, several activists picked up their tents and went home.

As the mayor became impatient with the movement and as occupations in other cities began to be removed by local authorities, Mayor Villarigosa offered the General Assembly an alternative space for them to be situated at in an attempt to move the encampment away from City Hall Park. That the Mayor offered the movement another location in which to encamp signals that he and others observed how important the occupation of space was to the movement. The General Assembly could not come to a consensus about the offer and eventually the offer was rescinded and the encampment was threatened with arrest.

Factionalism was the result of a focus on disruptive tactics, grievances against police and prisons, and aggression against activists perceived to be less committed to the movement or who articulate alternative movement narratives. The movement became desperate at the threat of eviction because their narrative had been tightly coupled with the park. To not have the space meant to face a crisis of rhetoric and a breaking of the preexisting social imaginary and the acting out of that vision.

The encampment was removed in the early hours of November 30th after a threat and delay of eviction on the previous night. A surge of activists more than doubled the numbers of people that had been in the park on previous nights to confront the police in an attempt to prevent or delay eviction. Although many people picked up their tents and left, over two-hundred were arrested in this

[23] OLA movement activity declined precipitously after their eviction from the park. Some members attempted to keep the movement active for a few years. (Dellacioppa, et. al 2013)

struggle with the police. During these last two nights, many of the new-comers seemed to be highly seasoned activists with previous experience confronting police. Medical clinics using anti-tear gas equipment and fluids seemed to spring up and some activists climbed into the trees of the park, which I had not previously seen or heard reports of in the two months of the encampment. This repertoire is most commonly used in the environmental movement in the Pacific Northwest, perhaps most famously in Eugene, Oregon in the summer of 1997 when hundreds of activists attempted to defend the logging of 39 downtown trees. The severe repression of these activists by the use of pepper spray and arrests helped to radicalize this movement.

These repertoires in the late stage of the movement are more consistent with what is observed in "convergence cultures" that surround actions against meetings of the Bretton Woods institutions, the G8 Summits, the political party conventions, and the Olympics. (Esparza 2009; Esparza & Price 2015) This next change in the demographics brought an additional change in the social imaginary from one of celebrating a prefigurative space to another that engages in protecting it at a cost. While it may have been more strategic to pivot the movement's focus elsewhere, it became imperative for the core of the OLA movement to maintain the occupied space at City Hall Park. The cost of this decision was a significant diminution of the numbers of persons involved in the OLA movement since occupation.

The movement ended, for the most part, after police forcibly removed activists from City Hall Park in the early hours of 30 November 2011. Lawsuits about police treatment of activists under arrest lingered in the following months and years.[24] Some occupy activists continued to work in committees and formed smaller marches and events, especially in the Spring of 2012. (Dellacioppa, et. al. 2013)

Conclusion

In this article I have examined the two-month occupation of Los Angeles City Hall Park by activists of the OLA movement in October and November of 2011. I have examined the use of physical space as an arena where activists generate decisions, set rules, and channel contention. I presented the factors that led to movement emergence, peak, and decline – a pattern consistent throughout the movement literature.

The narrative illustrates how movement repertoires change over time, in part defining shifts in the movement cycles of emergence, crest, and decline. This cycle drives possibilities at the inception of a movement (or repertoire availability, in Tillian language), cements its success at the crest, and drive its tactics as it attempts to thwart demise during its decline. The political identities of activists involved can change over this period as well, driving debate and

[24] As late as 2019, the California Second Court of Appeals handled such a case. (Heder v. City of L.A. 2019)

factionalism around tactics and movement aims. That the movement depended on the occupation of space seemed to constrain the movement and magnify both the internal and external political threats it faced.

The set of public seizures constituting the Occupy movement in late 2011 followed a movement wave with similarities to other prefigurative movements of the political left and right. The Zapatista uprising of 1994[25] (Bob 2005), Argentine protests of 2001 (Sitrin 2006), and Ottawa trucker encampment of 2022[26] all followed the same pattern of movement rise, crest, and decline and all of them initiated spin-off movements. (McAdam 1995) The differences between the movements are also vast, necessitating further research into their dynamics.

Spanning the life cycle of the occupation of the park, OLA as an arena follows a familiar pattern, encouraged by ideas generated internally by activists themselves. Setting up space as an important organizing tactic from the outset, the split between OLA and OHLA also illustrates how political differences can take on spatial dimensions. As players began to disagree about the rules of the arena, this necessitated OHLA to set up its own arena from which to develop their own rules, decisions, and outcomes. As with OLA, this new arena also manifested itself in the occupation of physical space, a democratic process, and asserting autonomy, consistent with Puerta del Sol and other documents influencing the movement. Ethnographic material allows for scholars to understand how activist ideas motivate movements to move from one point in a cycle to another. As movement activity moves increasingly into online activism and as researchers rely on online data collection, geographic space continues to play a role in the generation of movement ideas and in their actions.

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[25] While many recognize the Zapatista uprising of 1994 as part of a protest wave, their movement continues to be strong, even decades later.

[26] Hum, Peter. February 11, 2022. "Enough is enough, Overbrook community says of convoy encampment in stadium lot." in *Postmedia News*. Toronto: Postmedia Network.

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