

Alternative Horizons - Understanding Occupy's Politics

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In our research series on Occupy's alternative politics, our aim is to address some of the fundamental criticisms held against the movement. Confronting in the process why it is wrong to conflate Occupy's alternative participatory politics, which emphasises 'inclusiveness, openness, and tolerance' with a critique of liberalism, our research will show why the very philosophy and foundational structures of Occupy's non-dominant, horizontal and 'mutually recognitive' politics is the mark of a truly radical, revolutionary (participatory) horizon.

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Since the earliest days of Occupy Wall Street, the social movement has organised around a central message: "We are the 99%". Starting in Manhattan, New York by a small group of activists, the movement was inspired by a sense of outrage against the bank bailouts and growing inequality, as well as by such movements as the "Arab Spring", the student protests in Britain, and the "indignado" movement in Greece and Spain. Originally influenced by strands of anarchist study in the field of anthropology, the Occupy Wall Street movement first made camp in Zuccotti Park and inspired massive marches throughout the city of New York, whilst horizontally organising its own medical centres and libraries, shutting down key bridges and ports, and inspiring countless other movements in cities across North America and Europe. All of this was achieved, primarily, around the idea of a directly democratic, non-dominant and non-hierarchical politics which has since been criticised in academic circles or been subject to deep misunderstanding.

For us, the misunderstanding of Occupy-style politics concerns the criteria by which Occupy-style movements are measured. Most frequently, political movements opposed to the status quo are often assessed by their instrumental effect. "What specific difference" – so goes the familiar litany – "has the Occupy movement made?" Our response to such criticism is that Occupy is not to be assessed strictly in terms of specific policy differences – for example, its effect upon government policy. It is to be assessed, firstly, in terms of the alternative public space that it creates and the mutual recognition between individuals that (in however fragile a fashion) it brings into existence.

This is not to say that specific differences – say, differences in welfare provision or property-distribution – are unimportant. Far from it. It is to say, however, that the ultimate goal or rationale of emancipating activity is the mutual recognition which commonising entails¹ in the field of participatory public engagement.

1 In the last sentence of *Communist Manifesto* Part II, Marx envisages communist society as 'an association, in which the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all'.

In our research series we argue that Occupy-style movements attempt on the level of praxis to answer questions around the contemporary crisis of democracy, participatory politics and what it means to be ‘public’ in 21st Century society. Furthermore, we claim that what is refreshing about Occupy and its ‘mutually recognitive’ politics is its insistence that its ultimate goal (i.e., emancipatory change) must be, from the start, a living reality. In other words, if mutual recognition is to be possible, the goal has to exist in the present: for emancipation to *be* emancipation, it must start as it aims to go on.

One of the most telling formulations regarding the Occupy movement comes from Yotam Marom, wherein he writes that ‘Occupation in general, as a tactic, is a really brilliant form of dual-power struggle because the occupation is both a home where we get to practice the alternative – by practicing a participatory democracy, by having our radical libraries, by having a medical tent where anybody can get treatment, that kind of thing on a small level – and it’s also a staging ground for struggle outwards’.² The notion of what Marom calls ‘a home where we get to practice the alternative’ is fundamental, we claim, to the future of emancipatory public engagement.

This aspect of Occupy’s politics, moreover, which in the first instance sees the creation of an alternative ‘mutually recognitive’ public space, is encapsulated by the notion of *prefiguration*. The notion of prefiguration may be approached by understanding Marom’s description of occupation as ‘a home where we get to practice the alternative’ because the ‘home’ concerned – together with the ‘fun’ and ‘caring’ which it involves³ – belongs, we may say, in the present and the future alike. It exists in an emancipatory or proleptic or not-yet-existing manner, as an exemplar – to be sure, an experimental and tentative exemplar – of the world at which revolution aims. Insofar as Occupy-style movements might agree to be measured by criteria, they present themselves not as ventures which may or may not bring about specific differences but as promissory notes on a social world which is yet to be. No doubt, opinions may differ – may reasonably differ – on the question of whether the world is poised on the brink of emancipatory change, as a prefigurative stance may sometimes seem to claim. But anyone interested in bringing such change into existence must be impressed by the circumstance that, for Occupy, prioritize mutual recognition (‘a home where we get to practice the alternative’) and, as we claim, an alternative political horizon that points to a ‘many-sided human transformation’ on behalf of an alternative anthropology, epistemology and cosmology. This is evidenced in how Occupy treats, for example, mutual recognition as an already existing principle rather than projecting it into the future as an evanescent dream.

These brief comments indicate how, we think, Occupy may be defended against its critics. When the term “recognition” is introduced, then and only then can Occupy be

2 N. Klein and Y. Motam, ‘Why Now? What Next? Naomi Klein and Yotam Maron in Conversation about Occupy Wall Street’ *The Nation* (9 January 2012).

3 D. Graeber *The Democracy Project* (London: Allen Lane 2013) p. 240.

judged in a politically sensitive and searching way. A merely instrumental conception of political organisation – a conception where organisations are assessed in the light of specific policy differences they make – fails to focus on the sort of movement that Occupy is. Similarly, we argue that criticisms against Occupy's alternative, non-dominant, horizontal and 'mutually recognitive' (i.e., participatory, consensus-based) politics on behalf of traditional notions of authoritarian and hierarchical political engagement fails to do justice to the truly revolutionary horizon demanded in 21st Century society.

In already published works and those that we intend to publish in the future, the aim of our research series is to further develop an understanding of Occupy-styled events that recognises how, if mutual recognition can come into existence in and through social movements, there is no need for the one-sided and unequal recognition that 'traditional' political representation involves. The stirring success of Occupy was and is not only in how it energises people (via the creation of alternative public spaces) to speak out against a deeply unjust society or brings to (inter)national attention the inequalities that presently exist beneath the facade contemporary democratic capitalism. For us, the success of Occupy is precisely in its refusal to buckle to the pressures of 'coercive society' and replicate the ideology of hierarchy and domination that invariably manifest 'objectively' through one-sided (recognitively speaking) circuits of power. Occupy's emphasis on establishing a social dynamic that fosters 'mutual recognition' and subject-subject relations should be commended as both courageous and truly radical, not blamed as the source of its inability to sustain itself in the midst of a coercive social circumstance and alienated social world.

While our research project to date has a very general character when dealing with questions around the crisis of democracy, a critique of capitalism, and what being active in the public sphere means, our work suggests how in the future more detailed questions may be answered. On what understanding of Occupy's alternative politics and the term 'recognition' does the above sketch of our position turn? In work published on Heathwood's website, we have distinguished between our own understanding of recognition and the understanding – influenced by identity-politics and reformist perspectives – which predominates in academic literature.⁴ We have stressed (in brief and schematic terms) the difference between Occupy-style and liberal positions.⁵ We have written extensively in defence of Occupy's non-dominant, horizontal and consensus-based approach and on the different meanings around grassroots, participatory (systemic) change.

Carrying forward these arguments, we are currently preparing a paper which rejects David Harvey's charge that Occupy's commitment to 'horizontality' – which we see as rooted in mutual recognition – prevents addressing large-scale social and economic

4 See R. Gunn and A. Wilding 'Revolutionary or Less-than-Revolutionary Recognition?' and 'Occupy as Mutual Recognition' (www.heathwoodpress.com).

5 See Gunn's and Wilding's comment (supporting Robert Smith and attacking Jason Hicke) on R.C. Smith 'In defence of Occupy's politics' (www.heathwoodpress.com).

issues.⁶ We are also preparing a paper that follows-up on the significance of a ‘mutually recognitive’ politics, particularly in relation to alternative forms of collectivity and public engagement in light of what we perceive as a ‘many-sided human transformation’ that coincides with an alternative anthropology, epistemology and cosmology.

The project described above is the result of a collaborative effort between R.C. Smith, Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding in conjunction with research presently being developed at Heathwood Institute and Press. For more information about the research described and the greater collective project at Heathwood, please see: <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/>

6 D. Harvey *Rebel Cities* (London: Verso 2013) ch. 3; also pp. 125, 150-2.