

## HEATHWOOD: CRITICAL THEORY FOR REVOLUTIONARY PRACTICE

Richard Gunn, Robert Smith and Adrian Wilding

During the cycle of struggles which opened in 2011, and which saw the emergence of Occupy movements, a much-echoed slogan was 'You can't evict an idea'. The slogan repays attention, not least because so many occupations *were* oppressed or evicted – with water cannons and riot police and the forces of terrified states. In the aftermath of such evictions, should the slogan be read as a reassuring mantra? Should the phrase 'You can't evict an idea!' placate us by advising that, although the battle on the streets has been lost, the *real* struggle – the struggle in learned journals, or on the internet, or in the republic of letters – still has to take place?

Such a reading strikes us as mistaken. It embraces defeat, by construing a defiant assertion as a stoical commonplace. It misunderstands the relation between *theory* and *experience* which characterises revolutionary ideas. If ideas support what Max Horkheimer terms 'quietism or conformism' then, to be sure, everyday life bows to circumstances and theory goes its own, supposedly self-sufficient, way. If, on the other hand, 'every part of the theory presupposes the critique of the existing order' (Horkheimer again) theory and experience entwine together and reinforce one another in unforgettable fashions. Like a question that, once asked, continues to press for an answer, revolutionary theory – in Horkheimer's term, critical theory – points towards alternative horizons and to possibilities and challenges that refuse to go away.<sup>1</sup> The importance of such ideas, and of the events which inspire them, is not that (in the terminology of traditional Marxism-Leninism) consciousness has been raised. It is that the texture of experience has been enriched in a self-transformative and self-educative manner. You can't evict an idea – not because ideas are invincible but because a new beginning has been made.

It is in this spirit that Heathwood Institute and Press has published, on its website ([www.heathwoodpress.com](http://www.heathwoodpress.com)), a series of articles that explore the ideas of the Occupy movement. The series does not attempt to prize a reader's attention from political issues but to show how, in the light of Occupy, theory and experience interfold in novel and self-emancipatory ways. Stated differently, our aim is to highlight possibilities that the years 2011-2013 have made clear. If *theory* is currently on the revolutionary left's agenda, this is not because stoicism has taken over but because, after decades of neoliberal hegemony, ideas which point towards the future have become subjects of debate.

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<sup>1</sup> For Horkheimer references in this paragraph, see Max Horkheimer 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in his *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Seabury Press 1972) p. 229.

On Heathwood's website, articles by R.C. Smith and by Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding (who write together) have addressed questions raised by the Occupy movement. In what follows, we sketch Smith's contributions before outlining Gunn's and Wilding's work.

Two articles by Smith are relevant in the present connection: 'In defense of Occupy's emphasis on non-dominant, hierarchical organisation' (published at <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/defense-occupys-emphasis-non-dominant-non-hierarchical-organisation/> on 15 September 2013) and 'In defense of Occupy's politics' (published at <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/defense-occupys-politics/> on 15 November 2013). In the first of the two papers, Smith argues that Occupy's emphasis on establishing a social dynamic that fosters mutual subject-subject relations should be commended as truly radical – as courageous, in the face of coercive social relations – and that it is mistaken to characterise the movement as unable to sustain itself. Against comments made by Robert Reich and Slavoj Žižek, to name just two, Smith claims that Occupy Wall Street was entirely correct to refuse to replicate ideologies of hierarchy by submitting to a new dominant leader. Smith emphasises the importance of understanding Occupy-style events as alternative public spaces that promote and support the notion of a free flourishing and liberated subject.

Carrying forward these arguments, Smith's follow-up paper, 'In defense of Occupy's politics', addresses some of the deeper criticisms levelled against Occupy's alternative politics. Smith explains why it is fundamentally mistaken to conflate Occupy's inclusive and open politics with liberalism, and argues that the philosophy and foundational structures of Occupy's non-hierarchical, horizontalist politics is the mark of a radical and revolutionary horizon. Building upon the work of Gunn and Wilding, Smith emphasises the importance of understanding Occupy's grassroots politics as 'mutual recognition' (see below), commenting in turn on several themes raised by Occupy, ranging from a critique of politics to non-violence, radical participatory democracy and an alternative understanding of processes of social (historical) change.

With mutual recognition seen as fundamental to a radical political horizon, Smith's analysis and defense of Occupy's politics intersects with another strand of work being published by Heathwood. This strand concerns the development of an alternative philosophy of systemic change. This project considers the relation between theory and experience and addresses the problem that commons-specific movements lack an adequate foundation in critical theory. Smith's primary aim when addressing systemic change is to formulate a radical foundation that involves reconceptualising modern political economy. In the process, he explores revolutionary grassroots politics and introduces a transitory, integrative, multidimensional notion of fundamental social change – one that works toward an alternative epistemology, cosmology and anthropology together with the notion of a liberated, efficacious and mediating subject.

In connection with Occupy, a further sequence of Heathwood-published lectures is relevant: Smith's 'Revolution, History and Dominating Social Systems: Notes on a foundational approach to systemic change' (published at <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/revolution-history-and-dominating-social-systems-notes-on-a-foundational-approach-to-systemic-change-lecture-notes-2013-2014/> on 20 January 2014). In these lectures, several key themes in Heathwood's work are laid out and expanded. Drawing again from Gunn and Wilding's work on recognition and his own Frankfurt-School inspired interdisciplinary studies, Smith elaborates on what a revolutionary grassroots politics might look like, theoretically and practically. He emphasises the importance of understanding emancipatory social movements as prefigurative. If the ultimate goal or rationale of Occupy-style events is mutual recognition, and if commoning entails participatory public engagement, then Occupy and commoning see emancipation in identical terms. They prefigure the same alternative world. In this connection, Smith (like Gunn and Wilding) underlines the importance of prefiguration – a term to which this article returns – and engages with a number of important themes. The themes include a critique of dominating social systems, a critique of epistemology and a critique of some of capitalism's fundamental inner workings.

We turn now to Heathwood contributions by Gunn and Wilding – which, although complementary with Smith's work, have a distinctive emphasis. The emphasis is on the category of *recognition*: Gunn and Wilding are guided by a contrast between *contradictory recognition* (which, following Hegel's writings, they see as subsisting throughout history) and *mutual recognition* (which must exist if emancipation is to be real).<sup>2</sup> This contrast leads them to a specific view of how the Occupy movement may be assessed. On the traditional left, it has been standard to judge Occupy instrumentally, in terms of its impact on government policy. Gunn and Wilding focus instead on what goes on in the occupations themselves, finding there a principle of mutual recognition – an egalitarian and emancipated form of interaction – which consciously breaks with the hierarchical and undemocratic nature of the capitalist world. In their commitment to horizontalism, direct democracy and mutual aid, occupiers *prefigure* a post-capitalist freedom. Occupied spaces became exemplars – to be sure, experimental and tentative exemplars – 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 reforms 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, in occupations, mutual recognition is an already existing principle rather than an evanescent dream.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for discussion of the contrast between *contradictory* and *mutual* recognition and for an account of Hegel, Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding 'Revolutionary or Less-than-Revolutionary Recognition?' published on the Heathwood website on 24 July 2013: <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/revolutionary-less-than-revolutionary-recognition/>

Thus, in their article 'Occupy as Mutual Recognition' (published at <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/occupy-mutual-recognition/> on 12 November 2013), Gunn and Wilding argue that the revolutionary implications of Occupy can be grasped only when occupied zones are seen to anticipate, and point forward towards, a social existence where mutual recognition obtains. In arguing for this position, Gunn and Wilding distinguish sharply between their own understanding of recognition and the understanding that academic political theory – most notably, political theory associated with Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth – presents. Whereas mutual recognition is understood in the Hegelian tradition as a realm of free and unstructured interaction, present-day political theory links recognition to reformist perspectives and clips the concept's revolutionary wings. An emphasis on mutual recognition sharpens the challenge of Occupy and distances itself from academia in the same breath. Whereas recognition is a term that revolutionaries should take to themselves, it is a term which neoliberal establishments should dread.

A second related discussion at Heathwood follows Smith's 'In defence of Occupy's politics' in addressing criticisms which Occupy has faced. In their 'Hierarchy or Horizontalism? - Critics of Occupy' (published at <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/hierarchy-or-horizontalism-critics-of-occupy/> on 31 January 2014), Gunn and Wilding discuss issues which Nancy Fraser and David Harvey have raised. Against Fraser's revamped notion of a “public sphere” (a revamping that, seemingly, presupposes representative democracy), Gunn and Wilding point to the virtues and resilience of horizontalism and the unstructured interaction that it entails. Against Harvey's measuring of Occupy against tacitly hierarchical organisational criteria, Gunn and Wilding stress recognition – a theme where Harvey has little to say. In addition, 'Hierarchy or Horizontalism?' discusses what Harvey terms the 'problem of scale' – and suggests a way in which, compatibly with a politics of mutual recognition, the 'politics of scale' may be addressed. Exploring the politics of mutual recognition suggests alternatives to the *dirigisme* which Harvey, along with Slavoj Žižek, sees as the only solution to global-scale problems such as climate change.

Underlying both of the Gunn and Wilding articles mentioned here is the notion that Occupy-style politics have a relevance not restricted to 2011-2013 events. Occupy-style politics is, as Smith and Gunn and Wilding claim, on-going. In the Heathwood discussions, theory does not lick its wounds in a period of defeat but points forward to initiatives which have yet to be made. In a recent article in *ROAR Magazine*, Justin Wedes says that he writes as a keeper of 'faith in another possible world'.<sup>3</sup> We share this faith, in the sense that theory and experience circulate – in a prefigurative sense. Through a theory of mutual recognition, we consider, revolutionary practice can understand itself and gain a strategic perspective. Through reflection on the events of 2011-2013, critical theory can shed its reformism and point itself towards what may

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3 Justin Wedes 'On founders and keepers of Occupy Wall Street' *ROAR Magazine* 10 February 2014.

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Our comments so far have focused on articles which have been published and perspectives which have been sketched. In what directions may Heathwood discussions on Occupy develop? An obvious desideratum is: more, much more, website discussion. When the river-beds of discussion break their banks, and the horizontalism of good conversation flourishes everywhere, the aims of the website are fulfilled. So to say, discussion of Occupy practices what it preaches. A further, more specific, desideratum is: the Occupy-style themes that have been underlined need to be given an international dimension. Beyond the public squares and parks of Northern Hemisphere cities, prefigurative politics in Latin America and the Global South generally are alive. The very phrase “Occupy-style politics” – but is there an alternative? – has, perhaps, a parochial ring. If occupations of the last two years have rejuvenated critical theory, the sources which can nourish forward-looking perspectives are all around us.

Following on from this, Heathwood intends in the coming months to link critical theory more closely with revolutionary practice. How can we as theorists and political activists support the growing range of prefigurative political and social movements across the globe? How can critical theory be used to analyse and aid these movements as they work toward defending and widening “the commons”? Having laid the foundations in our research series on Occupy, we now plan to explore these questions and a range of issues spanning critical discussions of power and violence – and to undertake further studies of radical, participatory democracy and economic alternatives.

The present article has sought to bring out the many-sidedness of Occupy-related discussions on the Heathwood website. The aim of these discussions is not to anatomise a movement which critics see as having gone into abeyance. Nor is it to transfer the significance of Occupy from interaction on the streets to the republic of letters – or to the internet. On the contrary, the articles take as their starting point the slogan *You can't evict an idea!* – and understand the slogan in a specific sense. The slogan does not imply that ideas inhabit an eternal realm, which (after defeat) may be invoked in a stoical or consoling sense. What it does imply is a political beginning: one where events point towards questions which hegemonic liberalism finds difficult – finds impossible – to still. The questions are, we suggest, ones which concern recognition. In the articles that we have referred to, mutual recognition is understood in a prefigurative fashion and only a single rule is acknowledged: emancipation must continue as it means to go on.