

ON 'LIBERALISM' AND OCCUPY

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[Note: This short piece was posted in response to R.C. Smith's 'In defence of Occupy's politics' (<http://www.heathwoodpress.com>). It attempts to complement Smith's argument.]

We write to support R.C Smith's claim, in his 'In defence of Occupy's politics', that Jason Hickel's 'Liberalism and the politics of Occupy Wall Street' (*Anthropology of This Century* Issue 4 (May 2012)) misses the mark. Hickel maintains that 'the assumptions and subjectivities that organise liberalism continued to operate in the Occupy movement' – and that, in particular, Occupy's endorsement of 'the liberal ethic of inclusiveness, openness, and tolerance' made it an ineffective opponent to neoliberal power.

Hickel's line of argument strikes us as fatuous – and we point to one aspect of this fatuity here. Besides the numerous weaknesses identified by Smith, we note that Hickel understands 'liberalism' in an inadequate way.

Once upon a time, in the dim movements of its historical beginnings, liberalism oriented itself towards notions of Enlightenment and human dignity (Ernst Bloch *The Principle of Hope*, Blackwell 1986, p. 543). Even then, however, entanglement with bourgeois values were present. The natural rights tradition, from which liberalism emerged, propounded a *natural right to self-defence* together with a *natural right to property* – with the consequence that liberal values came to be values of a “possessive individualist” kind. According to liberalism, the human self came to be seen as an owner of his or her individual moral area or sphere – and notions of liberty as “negative” liberty grew apace. If we fast-forward this sketch of liberalism to the neoliberal era, what we find is that liberalism has long since shed its early involvement with dignity and Enlightenment autonomy. Rather than dwelling on notions of responsibility and accountability and real (as distinct from merely formal) self-determination, liberalism has come to see individuals as owners of rights that they may or may not possess. An image of the world as seen by neoliberal liberalism is that of suburban gardens – where each proprietor glares at each other suspiciously, from behind his (it is usually 'his') car-port or hedge.

From this sketch, it should be apparent that the world which Occupy-style movements strive to bring into existence has nothing in common with the world which liberalism – especially, neoliberal liberalism – celebrates. Whereas neoliberal

liberalism views human beings as free *in spite of* one another, Occupy-style movements attempt to construct spaces where individuals are free *in and through* one another – and where mutual recognition obtains. If Occupy endorses 'inclusiveness, openness, and tolerance' – the words are Hickel's – this is not because it is liberal but because it attempts to succeed where liberalism failed. If a spectator is in search of liberalism at Gezi Park, a first place to look might be the shopping mall that the state was planning to build or the water cannons that a neoliberal police force trained.

Hickel fails to see the decisive difference between the *formal* rhetoric of inclusiveness and tolerance and freedom propounded by liberals (which is in fact belied by the play of the capitalist market which they simultaneously support) and the *substantially* inclusive and open and free (because horizontal and leaderless) interaction we have termed 'mutual recognition' and which, we argue, Occupy exemplifies.