



## Communism, occupy and the question of form

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### abstract

Is it too bizarre to think of horizontalism and ‘prefigurative politics’ as opening the possibilities for a political form, like the (Leninist) party, one that will not be reified and abstracted from social relations? Can strategic politics converge with prefigurative politics – the latter ensuring the former is properly embedded in the social and no longer abstract? A serious understanding of Occupy provides some answers. Here was a form of the political that did not really come safely hedged by the ‘space of appearance of freedom’, but instead was laced with social contradictions and power relations. Occupied spaces were of course spaces of dense, interiorised hermeneutic practices of freedom – they were also, understood properly, incubators of a new political form firmly embedded in social contradiction and radical practices rupturing the dominant order. Occupy started out with questions of economic injustice but went on to come increasingly close to posing the question of political power. That is, Occupy exemplified ‘working through the economy’ and posited the economy as the realm of subjectivity. Without naming it, Occupy poses communism afresh.

### Resonance

Occupy as a form has often been discussed. For Jodi Dean, Occupy gave form to structural inequality (1% vs. 99%) and acted like ‘a nascent party’ (2013: 60). However, even those who always lauded ‘micro-politics of resistance’ or ‘subaltern agency’ seem to now veer towards something like the idea of a form.

Judith Butler came close (but, of course, did not arrive at) to the idea of form when she argued that Occupy ‘gave body’ to a ‘united people’ against the illegitimacy of the power of our rulers (Butler, 2012). At another point, she celebrates Occupy as the ‘form of the sustaining social bond’ (Butler, 2011a: 13).

And with Spivak, it feels like she is discovering how some kinds of political agency within ‘modernity’ can after all be supported – hence she went ahead and supported the General Strike (Spivak, 2011). The problem started with her theorizing – for now the General Strike becomes merely a ‘pressure tactic’, detached from the working class and attached to some vague ‘people with anti-statist convictions’ (Spivak, 2011: 9)<sup>1</sup>. The move is clear: since ignoring Occupy and the General Strike was not an option, they must be squeezed thin to fit the narrow confines of ‘subaltern agency’.

No wonder then that Butler would not really want to understand Occupy as a form, instead using terms like the ‘alliance of bodies’ and so on<sup>2</sup>. She talks about the ‘vulnerability’ of those who ‘demonstrate without authorization, those who go, unarmed, and confront the police, the army or other security forces, those who are transgender in a transphobic environment, those who do not have visa in countries that criminalize those who want to become their citizens’ (translation in Lambert, 2013). She talks about ‘[g]athered bodies that find themselves and that constitute themselves as “we the people”’ (translation in Lambert, 2013).

Butler refuses to see how these ‘bodies’ do not allow their ‘vulnerability’ to come in the way of getting organized as a formidable force, as an incipient form of power. She seems too invested in their vulnerability, fetishizing it to fit the notion of a poststructuralist/subalternist ‘marginal voice’ or ‘micro-resistance’. Worse, the only way she apparently breaks with this ‘micropolitics’ is by way of resorting to a notion of a ‘united’ ‘we the people’ which seems highly populist. In this sense, Butler overlooks how, in Occupy, the ‘alliance of bodies’ and those who ‘demonstrate without authorisation’ reconstituted themselves in more revolutionary ways, incipiently moving towards what she would suppose to be unacceptably reified forms of power. Occupy, it seems, never properly registered on our theorists trapped in a particularly one-sided understanding of the notion of form and agency.

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1 Spivak opines that for Sorel, the general strike was not about revolution but ‘a way to energize the working class’ (2011: 9)! Every civil disobedience is counted as General Strike – even Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement which he always called off whenever the working masses came out in significant numbers! (see Anonymous, 2011b).

2 Butler seems to have used ‘alliance of bodies’ before Occupy (Butler, 2011b). She extends it to Occupy: ‘when bodies gather as they do to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space, they are also making broader demands’ (Butler, 2011a: 12).

Indeed, if not for the reality of the Occupy movement, the idea of a form is otherwise sought to be strictly avoided since it is likened to an ‘empty and formal structure’ marking certain ‘kinds of exclusions’ (Butler, 2000: 144). It would be likened to ‘an ideal big Other, or an ideal small other, which is more fundamental than any of its social formulations’ (*ibid.*). Any conception of Occupy as form or a nascent party will then get regarded as an imposition on the decentred practices of encampments and experiments in ‘prefigurative politics’. It would be regarded as ‘Kantian formalism’, the imposition of an abstract political on the social, full of exclusions of ‘autonomous agency’ (Butler, 2000: 144-146).

We also encounter the notion of form in Klossowski’s interpretation of Nietzsche, in his discussion on the ‘semiotic of impulses’. Impulses have intensities that fluctuate – these find ‘forms’ in gestures and movements (Klossowski, 1997: 37). These forms ‘cannot be distinguished from the invention of signs, which stabilises them through abbreviation. For in abbreviating them, these signs reduce the impulses, apparently suspending their fluctuation once and for all’ (*ibid.*). Ultimately, here form and sign or the ‘abbreviation of signs’ lead ‘to the fallacious “unity” of the agent’ (*ibid.*). Form is again regarded as what restricts, constricts, ‘reduces the impulses’ or abstracts from them.

However, we will make a counter argument: that it is not the emphasis on form but the move away from it that abstracts ‘spaces of freedom’ from social relations and from each other. There is no direct access to spaces of freedom without form. Similarly, there is no direct access to impulses and intensities without the forms of gestures and movements. Form cannot be separated from spaces of freedom or impulses. The move away from form leads to a self-contained and interiorized hermeneutics of freedom. Recall Jameson’s description of late capitalism as marked by ‘a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems’ (1991: 372)<sup>3</sup>. Each is marked by a strong spatial separation stemming ‘from different zones of time or from unrelated compartments of social and material universe’ (*ibid.*: 373).

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3 This is however not to equate the space of appearance of the political, abstracted from social relations (say liberal equality or a pure ‘practice of freedom’), to the simulacrum of postmodernist society. Instead for us, in Occupy, these practices of freedom are, contrary to what its practitioners think, a radical assertion in our sense of the term – that is, they are crucial for Occupy as a form. On this though, see Žižek: ‘the political as the domain of appearance (opposed to the social reality of class and other distinctions, that is, of society as the articulated social body) has nothing in common with the postmodern notion that we are entering the era of universalized simulacra...’ (2000: 195).

In other words, if occupied spaces were to be unrelated compartments, the novelty of the rupture with capitalism would soon be lost. Occupied spaces as the self-contained 'space of appearance' of freedom seem to so nicely make peace with capitalism. Negri pointed this out in his critique of Arendt's 'space of appearance of freedom', a term widely used in the context of Occupy: 'the continuous celebration of the fact that freedom preexists liberation and that the revolution is realized in the formation of the political space becomes the key to a historicist hermeneutics that systematically flattens down, or deforms, the novelty of the event and limits it to the American example' (Negri, 1999: 16).

I would like to consider another approach here. This one too has serious problems with the question of form and would emphasise decentred semiautonomous practices of freedom or occupied spaces. But it keeps the focus on anti-capitalism. For want of a better term, let us call it the approach of resonance. And an initial 'definition': *a form-sceptic anti-capitalist uncomfortable with a pure micro-politics of resistance can be said to subscribe to the resonance approach.*

This approach attempts to arrive at the notion of Occupy as a wider movement without however giving up the understanding of occupied spaces as spatially bounded and self-subsisting – not a very fruitful approach from our perspective. Once fixed in their self-subsistence and immanence, these spaces are then presented as resonating with each other. Thus referring to Occupy and other movements, Amin (2013: 3) writes: 'The street is a microcosm of multiple happenings and resonances from the distant spatial and temporal, a place of ebb and flow, an assemblage of the human and nonhuman'. Resonance from the distant spatial: this is how Occupy as 'connecting' all these occupied spaces, hence Occupy as a wider movement, seems to be understood here, if at all<sup>4</sup>.

One very significant earlier usage is in *The coming insurrection* (The Invisible Committee, 2009): 'Revolutionary movements do not spread by contamination but by resonance. Something that is constituted here resonates with the shock wave emitted by something constituted over there. A body that resonates does so according to its own mode'. Note the emphasis on the body, on space – the 'here' and the 'there'. The 'own mode' is not just spatial or territorial self-containment but emphasizes self-subsistence, strength, and immanence. Resonance here feels like a 'relation' between two bodies that cannot have a relation, for they exist in their absolute self-subsistence and immanence.

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4 Another usage is in a paper entitled 'The crisis of representation and the resonance of the Real Democracy Movement from the Indignados to Occupy' (Oikonomakis and Roos, 2013).

What about those who reject the notion of immanence and subscribe to some notion of dialectics and contradiction (among those who reject the form argument)? Take John Holloway<sup>5</sup>. He is critical of ‘pure micropolitics’ and hence is not comfortable with autonomous spaces of freedom, with the spatial boundedness of occupied spaces. He wants to start or ‘move from the particular’ but this, he insists, ‘does not mean a micropolitics’ (2010: 208). Trying to move away from micropolitics to the level of the wider movement, he asks: ‘how do struggles spread?’ And here the form-sceptic Holloway falls back upon the idea of resonance: ‘For one struggle to spill over into another, or to act as the spark that sets another burning, what is needed is a certain resonance, and these resonances do not follow formal organizational lines and are often hard to understand’ (2010: 211). So Occupy cannot be a micropolitics, but nor can it be construed as a form, which will be for Holloway a slide into a reified form and organization.

So ultimately, for the resonance approach, the different zones of freedom, or say encampments in Occupy, resonating with each other is taken to be adequate for revolutionary politics. This emanates from *one key underlying assumption* of this approach: that the (individual) encampment, the ‘space of freedom’ is not in any sense diluted or unreal because of the existence of the larger matrix of capitalist social relations<sup>6</sup>. Captured in the term ‘prefigurative politics’, here freedom co-exists and makes peace, with capitalism, even though it is presented by the resonance theorists as challenging capitalism.

Hence, for Graeber discussing Occupy, capital is parasitic upon this freedom (which he assumes already exists under capitalism). Capital ‘represents a certain logic that is actually parasitic upon a million other social relations, without which it couldn’t exist’ (in Wolfe and Graeber, 2012). These social relations are what already exist and upon which he wants to build a new society. So the new society will not be built out of whole cloth but with what is there, what already exists under the rule of capital. Occupy would be ‘a question of building on what we are already doing, expanding the zones of freedom, until freedom becomes the ultimate organizing principle’ (Graeber, 2013a: 295).

What we see here is an emphasis on camp-centric autonomous spaces, Occupy as isolated, decentered zones of freedom that Graeber imagines would become

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5 Holloway is clear that rather than the positive movement suggested by the theory of immanence, ‘subjectivity in capitalism is in the first place negative, the movement against the denial of subjectivity’ (2005: 164).

6 See Žižek: ‘Capitalism is not merely a category that delimits a positive social sphere but a formal-transcendental matrix that structures the entire social space – literally a mode of production’ (Žižek, 2006: 567).

the ultimate organizing principle of society as a whole. But Graeber also focuses on the movement as a whole. He takes account of the solidarity across social classes and groups. He describes the support from trade unions and expresses amazement at how a group of educated, privileged white youth at Zucotti Park in September 2011 could trigger a movement that then has scores of workers and other marginalized groups who are part of it.

He refers to strategic questions. He refers to the wider ‘balance of political forces, where each side was essentially improvising, trying to get a sense of the state of the game and what they could get away with at any given moment’ (Graeber, 2013a: 250). Indeed, for him ‘it is best, in fact, to think of all occupations and street actions as a kind of war’ (*ibid.*: 251). He also knows that law is only for show: what really matters is actual power on the ground. He has great insights on how to deal with the police. ‘Making one strategic concession (the one tent) and using that as a wedge was a perfect strategy’ of the police to divide the occupiers and break their solidarity (*ibid.*).

So he creates this entirely realistic picture of the total dominance of structures of power and violence. With this awareness of the ‘realities of power’, where do we go? Well, be that as it may, just act as though you are free, as though these structures do not exist!

‘Everyone is perfectly well aware the power structure does exist. But acting this way [as though we are free, as though these power structures do not exist] denies any moral authority to their inevitable, usually violent, response’ (Graeber, 2013a: 233).

The moral high ground he seeks for the occupations is of course well understood. But this only means that he is not really interested in the actual organizing of the revolutionary masses into a fighting force. We are back to the interiorized hermeneutics of the practices of freedom.

What we have is a kind of exteriorization of the ‘balance of forces’ (of the ‘capitalist totality’ and the structures of power) so that the encampments can be ‘safely’ celebrated as zones of freedom, prefigurative politics taken in isolation from ‘strategic/effective politics’ and so on. This approach valorizes freedom and even though it takes account of necessity, of the determinations of capital and the state, it wishes for freedom through withdrawal. Such a freedom is nothing but ‘a subjective impulse that invisibly escapes the whole sensible order of ends, the whole rational fabric of causes’ – the ‘freedom of Kantian critique’ (Badiou, 2004: 79). Now we know who is really taking a Kantian formalist position. This sensible order of ends is packed into a pejorative ‘capitalist totality’ and declared

to ‘only exist in our imagination’ (Graeber, in Wolfe and Graeber, 2012)<sup>7</sup>. Direct action is taken to fetch immediate results, a direct uncoupling from capital’s command or the unveiling of the supposed immanent ‘communist’ relations already at work under capitalism.

Even when Graeber (2013a) talks about as wide and broad a notion as ‘dual power’, he retains this *binary of a self-contained zone of freedom and an externalized power of the state and capital*. The dual power situation is not oriented as a temporary situation with one power (the revolutionary forces) eventually directed towards dislodging the established power – the dual forever *remains* dual in Graeber.

That is, even when the resonance approach resorts to strategic thinking and talks about the ‘balance of forces’, it is as fanciful as the interiorized hermeneutics of freedom. Decentralized practices and occupied spaces seek wishful exemption from the ‘balance of forces’ and are frozen into inaction when confronted with state power and the brutal repression – but was this really the story of Occupy? Perhaps not. Occupy seemed to mark a break from the strategic thinness and paralyzing hermeneutic denseness proposed by the resonance approach and those like Butler and Spivak. It pointed towards something far more liberating.

### Question of form

As we saw in Holloway, the assumption here is clearly that any ‘stronger’ (stronger than ‘resonance’) notion of Occupy would lead us to ‘follow formal organizational lines’ or towards valorizing reified forms. Eventually, ghosts of the party-state, or ‘totalitarian’ projects of ‘building communism’ are invoked to deter conceptions of Occupy as a form or a new kind of power<sup>8</sup>. Not power but anti-power, not form but decentralized practices or autonomous zones of freedom and their resonance – this is the focus of most accounts of Occupy.

However we must fine-tune our notion of form. In particular we want to state our difference with Butler, who never really confides in the term ‘form’, and Dean, who does.

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7 Graeber (in Wolfe and Graeber, 2012): ‘I think the “capitalist totality” only exists in our imagination. I don’t think there is a capitalist totality. I think there’s capital, which is extraordinarily powerful, and represents a certain logic that is actually parasitic upon a million other social relations, without which it couldn’t exist.’

8 Elsewhere, I have tried to show how in Venezuelan Socialism participatory democracy or ‘communal democracy’ exist as only complementary to (and not in order to dislodge) the liberal representative institutions (see Giri, 2013).

Dean sees Occupy as giving form to structural inequality: 'Occupy provides a political form for the incompatibility, the irreducible gap, between capitalism and the people' (2013: 59). For Judith Butler, Occupy has 'drawn attention to forms of structural inequality'; it 'has surely brought attention to the general economic system that relies upon, and produces, inequality with increasing intensity' (2012: 11).

Dean sees Occupy as giving form to the 'people', to the 'we': 'because of Occupy, we now appear to *ourselves* as *us* – we say "we", even as we argue who we are and what we want' (2013: 59; emphasis in original). Butler sees Occupy as 'giving body' ('form'?) to the idea of the united 'people': 'Abandoned by existing institutions, they [the 99%] assemble themselves in the name of a social and political equality, giving voice, body, movement, and visibility to an idea of "the people" regularly divided and effaced by existing power' (Butler, 2012).

Beyond this, there are obviously clear and strong differences between the two. Butler thinks of Occupy in terms of the alliance of bodies: 'the gathering together of bodies in a relentlessly public, obdurate, persisting, activist struggle that seeks to break and remake our political world' (Butler, 2011a: 13). Dean talks about the subjective capacity, quoting Badiou, upholding not just the rupture that is Occupy but also the 'organization of the consequences of that rupture' (2013: 59). She of course defends the notion of collective political subject and emphasizes the party.

More crucially, Dean trounces those who reject a new subjective form or capacity as merely some kind of 'representation'. The tables are turned on 'those who resist attempts to represent' for they, Dean points out, seem to be arguing that the movement is limited to only 'those who gather and act in its name'. As she points out, 'Occupy is more than the sum of its parts. It is the part and the sum' (2013: 59).

Dean, however, vacillates between the notion of form as 'subjective capacity' of the 'people' and one which stands, in her account, for the 'irreducible gap' between the 99% and 1%. It feels like the subjective capacity is to be mobilized not to do away with this gap, as the thrust of revolutionary politics, but to highlight the gap, bring it into focus and attention – but to what end? To keep highlighting it and possibly shame the rulers for presiding over an unjust system?

In other words, what we seem to get is a politics of opposition, not of a revolutionary alternative. After treating it as a form or 'nascent party', Dean reduces Occupy to 'opposition to capitalism': 'the problem of political



organization to which Occupy supplies a provisional answer is that of mobilizing and structuring opposition to capitalism' (Dean, 2013: 60). Thus when she goes on to emphasize class struggle it is not clear if she wants us to understand class struggle as only opposition to capitalism. The 'broad left party' she suggests, too, seems part of such a politics.

And finally consider this: 'a party names and expresses the movement's subjective capacity over and apart from the specificities of its actions, encampments, working groups and individual participants' (Dean, 2013: 61). She here nicely lends herself to all the attacks on Marxism for suggesting an abstract notion of the political not embedded in the specificities of action, encampments and so on – for example, the one by Negri: 'the theory of the workers' party presupposed the separation of the political from the social' (1996: 173), or of course Butler's charge of Kantian formalism.

What we intend to do here is to work out a notion of form and the party by engaging with decentered radical practices, viz., the 'specificities of actions, encampments, working groups' and also the idea and practices of consensus and horizontalism.

On their own, without a form, these radical practices are not already the space of appearance of freedom, as assumed by say the resonance theorists, but instead operate within the capitalist form (within, say, redistribution and rights, or as enclaves of freedom). For after all, the particular content of the capitalist universal is indeed about freedom as expressed in equivalent exchange, simulacrum and so on – and hence freedom within the determinations of capital. Graeber seems totally to ignore this when he imagines that we can go on 'expanding the zones of freedom, until freedom becomes the ultimate organizing principle' (2013: 295) – his communism envisions no break with the capitalist form and the inauguration of a new form. He wants to take a direct path from capitalist necessity to freedom – which is nothing but basking in the particular content of the capitalist universal, basking in one or the other version of 'formal equality' or the many transgressions and enclaves of freedom 'allowed by' late capitalism.

But we do not then want to now reject decentered practices of freedom and abstractly propose the notion of a form or party. Instead we try to show that these practices of freedom inaugurate a new form of the universal. What exactly appears in the 'space of appearance'? For us, "appearance" is thus not simply the domain of phenomena, but those "magic moments" in which another, noumenal dimension momentarily "appears" in ("shines through") some empirical/contingent phenomenon' (Žižek, 2000: 196). A new form shines

through practices of freedom and the resonance between them, much as, we will see below, Lenin saw that spontaneity already had elements of a revolutionary consciousness which the ‘economists’ refused to see. In other words, we take these practices seriously so that for us the political is inseparable from the social and form does not involve abstracting from social relations, or sliding into Kantian formalism.

Nor are we, in rejecting the theory of immanence and self-subsisting subjectivity, proposing just any kind of political articulation or subjectivation. In particular, we cannot go along with Ernesto Laclau’s critique of ‘radical immanentism’ and his emphasis on ‘political articulation’ (Laclau, 2001). His ‘political articulation’ too remains very much within the form of the capitalist universal – worse, it does not even pose the question of class struggle, which some radical immanentists like Negri do. No wonder, as Žižek points out, Laclau’s politics as the struggle for hegemony ‘forgets’ capitalism as a transcendental matrix (Žižek, 2006: 567).

A form which shines through social relations, contradictions, radical decentered practices of freedom and even the practices of horizontalism – such is the account Occupy allows us to develop. We start with two accounts of Occupy – one that leads to the reconstitution of the 99% into a populist ‘people’, which we will reject, and the other which leads to a radical reconstitution fissuring the ‘united people’ and headed towards a revolutionary politics, which we propose here.

## Reconstitution of the social

### *Populist reconstitution*

Consider a critical report on ‘the relations between the Occupy movement and chronically homeless, who have been present since its inception’ (Herring and Gluck, 2011). It argues that ‘the movement must take special care not to instrumentalize this precarious group in the way it seems the NYPD has’ (*ibid.*: 24). So the report argues that ‘the homeless question should be reframed as a question of how dissenters should treat those seeking food and a safe place to sleep’ (*ibid.*). Merely trying to help the homeless in terms of the welfareist calculus of costs and benefits would be to work with an idea of the 99% as handed down by existing dominant norms, the unreconstituted 99%. A reconstituted 99% would give us something like this: ‘the kitchens at Occupy Oakland and Occupy Philadelphia openly aim to feed the city’s homeless...’ (*ibid.*). Hence, the report concludes, ‘these efforts point to what new forms of solidarity and alliance could look like’ (*ibid.*).

A similar account of reconstitution and form: 'At Occupy, we created a new community from a group of disparate individual members of society – unemployed, students, union members, the homeless. Encampment gave us the proving ground we needed to build the internal relationships and trust necessary for collective political effort' (Snyder, 2011: 13). Clearly here you have a form defined by new internal relationships between the social components comprising the 99%.

Here the internal relations between different sections of the 99% are getting reoriented in a progressive direction. This is fundamental to the Occupy movement. However, there is nothing in this account of the reconstituted 99% which will stop it from say a populist 'united people' notwithstanding its 'anti-capitalism', à la Dean or Butler. So someone who emphasizes this 'progressive' reconstitution: 'The biggest and best goal implied by We are the ninety-nine percent is the reconstitution of the American "people" as progressive force bringing about a society that's just, sustainable, and free', easily goes on to in the same breath talk about building a populist left: 'the immense promise of the movement: nothing less than to build a left populism capable of rescuing the country in the name of the people of, by, and for whom it's allegedly governed' (Petersen, 2011: 30). Here Occupy as form is supposed to be about giving form and body to left populism.

#### *Radical reconstitution*

But turn to other accounts and then you see not a populist but a radical reconstitution of the social in Occupy. Consider this: 'I have never been directly oppressed by a member of this 1%, but I have been directly oppressed and exploited at the hands of police officers, queerbashers, sexual assaulters, landlords and bosses. Each of these enemies can surely claim a place within this 99%, yet that does not in any way mitigate our structural enmity' (Aragorn!, 2012: 168). Members of the 99% directly oppress other members of the 99%? What is going on?

Here we have fingers being pointed at each other within the 99%, accusations of collaboration, dissension, disunity – and yet also further probing of the relationship between the 99% and 1%. The picture is murky and not as heart-warming for a left looking for a populist 'we the 99%' anti-capitalism against the 1%! At the same time, this 'disunity' is really about strengthening the revolutionary camp since members of the police are called upon to no longer serve the 1% and join the 99% (even as many think that the police must in the first place be clearly counted as part of the 1%). Indeed, many police officers are supposed to have written an open letter declaring themselves part of the 99%:

‘We represent the 645 police officers who work hard every day to protect the citizens of Oakland. We, too, are the 99% fighting for better working conditions, fair treatment and the ability to provide a living for our children and families’ (Jilani, 2011).

Now this is a different kind of a reconstitution than what we saw above – for this does not make hurried, misplaced and often opportunist claims that the 1% is suddenly totally isolated and weak as against the (now mythically) united people or ‘we the 99%’. Instead, through Occupy, the bases of capitalism (say, among the 99% and those bases created through the particular content of freedom and ‘equivalent exchange’ in the capitalist universal) are gradually uncovered so that a consolidation of the revolutionary forces is possible – what takes place is, as we shall see, a ‘clarification of the situation’ in the course of the class struggle.

This means that Occupy had strong elements of going beyond a mere opposition to capitalism; it was not limited by an over-enthusiastic ‘love for freedom’ which abstractly proclaims that we are already free. Let it be noted that for our perspective, there is no problem as such in ‘acting as though we are free’ (a key anarchist precept) – for, after all, what else is the notion of the presupposition of communism, elaborated by say Lukács: ‘The theory of historical materialism therefore presupposes the universal actuality of the proletarian revolution’ (Lukács, 1970). Presupposing what is actual – a contradiction: such is the Marxist notion of acting as though one is free. It is from such a perspective that we approach say Graeber’s understanding of direct action as ‘acting as if you were already free otherwise’ and the *The coming insurrection*’s understanding of communism ‘as presupposition *and* as experiment... Communism as the matrix of a meticulous, audacious assault on domination’ (The Invisible Committee, 2009: 16).

So, our point: not freedom through withdrawal but through a real investment and embeddedness in the social and power relations, in effect breaking decisively with the ‘freedom of Kantian critique’. Let us here explore this radical reconstitution of social relations with regard to the working class and/or the proletariat in Occupy.

## Two elements of radical reconstitution

### *Practice-as-rupture and form*

Take the general strike of 2 November 2011 in Oakland<sup>9</sup>. It was not a usual strike. While the non-unionized workers (precarious labor) were more active they

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9 Aragorn! (2012) and Epstein (2013) provide incisive accounts of these events.

also had a kind of a militant solidarity with the unionized workers. The latter too joined the strike at the ports. ‘The general strike of November 2, 2011 appeared as it did, not as the voluntary withdrawal of labor from large factories and the like, but rather as masses of people who work in unorganized workplaces, who are unemployed or underemployed or precarious in one way or another, converging on the chokepoints of capital flow’ (Aragorn!, 2012: 156)<sup>10</sup>.

Involving even precarious labor, dispersed across time and space under the regime of mobile capital, this strike ruptured the safe arrangements of capital. From traditional Marxists to anarchists, all seem to laud the success of this strike, which showed solidarity between the unionized workers and other sections of the proletariat. This marked a new, radical practice – practice-as-rupture. The point is that there was no form adequate to such a practice – the solidarity across classes then appeared as conjunctural. Now here Occupy must be understood as providing this ‘adequate’ form. Indeed here we have a case where, as Badiou puts it, ‘the revolutionary process of organization is itself reworked, recast, penetrated and split by the primacy of practice’ (2004: 76)<sup>11</sup>.

Already, activists have noted the discovery of new mechanisms to facilitate this new practice. Not the old forms and means of organizing strike action by, say, a picket at the factory gates (whose importance still persists), but something novel – the flying picket: ‘the flying picket, originally developed as a secondary instrument of solidarity, becomes the primary mechanism of the strike’ (Aragorn!, 2012: 156).

Hence here we do not abstractly raise the flag of the party but grasp the form emerging in and through the radical practices and the corresponding

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10 The otherwise brilliant accounts in Aragorn! tend to suffer from emphasis on circulation rather than production as the main theatre of revolutionary actions. Toscano’s critique of *The coming insurrection* on this point might be relevant: ‘It is no accident that the kind of sabotage envisioned in *The coming insurrection* is on lines and nodes of circulation, and not on the machinery of production itself’ (Toscano, 2011: 33).

11 Closer to home, in India, the current struggle by Maruti-Suzuki workers (from June 2011 onwards) has similarly recast the question of radical, ‘decentralized’, ‘horizontal’, non-unionised practice (strikes, slow-down, sit-in, unprecedented solidarity between permanent and contract workers, challenge to established social democratic unions), and organizational form. This struggle might of course lose steam and gradually dissipate into ‘civil society’ initiatives, or get reabsorbed into social democratic unions that are themselves tottering. But who knows it might as well find a form adequate to the radical practices that can make this struggle a beacon for communist politics. This struggle has unfortunately not evoked the kind of serious engagement it deserves but for starters we have Chandra (2012), Anonymous (2011a), Anonymous (2012b).

reconstitution of social relations. Indeed, if we go back to Lenin, we see that he took ‘radical, decentered practices’, the ‘spontaneous activity’ of workers, very seriously. Lenin was critical of those who regarded workers’ own activity to be bound within the narrow confines of economic struggle. For Lenin, it is certain intellectuals (the ‘economists’) who want the workers to be in the quagmire of the narrow economic struggle (Lenin, 1975). The workers themselves are saying that ‘we are not children to be fed on the thin gruel of “economic” politics alone; we want to know everything that others know, we want to learn the details of *all* aspects of political life and to take part *actively* in every single political event’ (Lenin, 1975: 90-91).

### *Social differentiation and form*

This is only half the picture though. For such radical practices introduce a restructuring of social relations. These practices do not emanate from a purely subjective gesture or ‘action’, as Badiou would imagine, but has a basis in social relations. In particular, if workers do not want ‘to be fed on the thin gruel of “economic” politics alone’, then we must here reckon with the category of the ‘advanced worker’ whose emergence now marks a reconstitution of the social, of the 99%. This reconstitution is one marked by differentiation within the 99%; with, as we shall see, the emergence of a ‘radical minority’ (the ‘advanced worker’) now immediately accepted as a political majority. Ernest Mandel points out that this has an ‘objective basis’: ‘the category of “advanced workers” stems from the objectively inevitable stratification of the working class’ (Mandel, 1970). What we have here is an expression of the differentiation within the working class that Leninists have engaged with for a long time.

Radical practice being strongly rooted in the social relations (of which say even the unionized workers are a part), means that such practices that are the actions of a radical minority do not lead to disunity but to a higher revolutionary unity. Thus while even though only one section of the 99% took an active and determining role (say, only Occupy Oakland vis-à-vis the rest of the Occupy movement, or only nonunionized workers as in the General Strike), the dissension and disunity that it creates within the movement is nothing but a higher unity. This radical intervention supposedly bringing ‘disunity’, is ‘what everyone wants’, ‘what the situation demands’. It is such radical practices embedded in social relations that provides what Marx calls the ‘line of march’ for the movement as a whole (Marx, 2003: 9-10).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In *The communist manifesto*, Marx emphasizes ‘the interests of the movement as a whole’ and ‘clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate

Like the nonunionized workers above, then, there are many instances within Occupy where a radical minority initiates action which pushes the entire movement forward, providing a line of march. Thus blacks fighting police brutality and clashing with the police will now want to do it in the name of Occupy, as in Occupy the Hood. But since Occupy has many other sections of society, this means that the existing divisions between blacks and those among the white population now gets rearticulated. The action of a minority of blacks will then most likely become the action of all within the 99% now duly reconstituted. No longer is it a question of giving ‘adequate representation’ or rights and protection to blacks but of blacks in their minority, oppressed status now rising as a political subject in the name of the wider 99%. Hence Occupy the Hood or ‘The Battle of Oakland’ did not really divide Occupy Wall Street or the Occupy movement, but rather raised it to a different level. Occupy Oakland’s actions raised the standards for all other Occupies. It radicalized Occupy, made it unusable for liberal democrats and the populist left, thereby clarifying the situation. The populist Mayor who started with supporting Occupy Wall Street ended up condemning Occupy Oakland and urged OWS to derecognize them! (Anonymous, 2012a).

Here one would ask: does not minority action (say violent confrontation with the police) alienate people from the movement? This is an important question, raised particularly with regard to Occupy Oakland<sup>13</sup>. No matter which way one answers this question, the crucial point is that questions of tactics cannot be detached from class struggle and social contradiction. One particular manifestation of this is to treat the ‘use of violence’ by protestors as a by-product of say ‘alienation of the youth’ due to austerity and cuts in the public and community services. This is how an important article in *The socialist register* seems to understand what it calls the Insurrectionists in Occupy Oakland (Epstein, 2013: 80). For Epstein, the Insurrectionists are engaging in ‘highly confrontational politics’ because of their ‘desperate situation’ and a ‘deep sense of alienation from mainstream culture and politics’ (*ibid.*). Detaching insurrection and ‘use of violence’ from the question of class struggle and social contradictions thus smacks of an elitist sociology akin to studying ‘dangerous traits’ in the underclass.

Indeed, there is no denying that such ‘extreme tactics’ can be counterproductive – but not always. Sometimes extreme tactics or use of violence alienates people and narrows the movement. At other times, however, it radicalizes the supporters and dis-alienates them. Consider the unprecedented level of violence

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general results of the proletarian movement’ (Marx, 2003: 9-10). I have dealt with this idea in Giri, 2013.

13 See a lucid account of this debate in Occupy Oakland in Epstein (2013).

used by the underclass in, say, the London riots of 2011 – did it empower or disempower the ‘feral underclass’ vis-à-vis the dominant order, state and capital<sup>14</sup>? There is no simple answer and hence no simple position to be taken against violence or against insurrection.

From the perspective of the movement, it becomes a choice between broadening and strengthening the movement, but at the cost of left-liberal or social democratic appropriation and control, or ‘narrowing’ it through extreme tactics – the catch is that this narrowing might actually be one which might lead to a broadening among the proletarian sections, which means that the ‘narrowing’ is most likely among more privileged but progressive upper middle class sections. With Occupy – which is where its uniqueness lies – it felt like you could narrow the movement, that is radicalize it with proletarian elements at the front, and yet not really lose much of the wider social base, among, say, the middle class (who, at least after the movement broadened post-Zucotti, lost their hegemony) – hence OWS could not simply disown Occupy Oakland and treat it as a band of alienated extremists, but reconcile with this new wave of radicalization.

The claim I make is therefore: Occupy becomes the form which allows this ‘minority’ to now emerge as the ‘majority’ in the sense that all of Occupy, indeed the entire country, is in solidarity with and accepts the ‘leadership’ of the minority (say, Occupy Oakland)<sup>15</sup>. Minority action *is* majority will. Badiou has got it right: those who are in the movement, ‘and who are obviously a minority, possess an accepted authority to proclaim that the historical destiny of the country (including the overwhelming majority comprising the people who are not there) is them’ (2012: 60).

Rejecting, however, Badiou’s formal schema, we showed how this process is inseparable from practice-as-rupture and differentiation (stratification) within the

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14 The proletarian character of the London riots is emphasized, without underrating them as merely nihilistic (as Badiou would do), in Rocamadur/Blaumachen (2012). Even those too invested in the ‘organised Left’ (actually social democracy) now seem to appreciate the riots better as this report makes clear: ‘Riots are often seen as simply the chaotic symptom of radically unjust societies – however, it is becoming apparent that the riots have acted as the catalyst for a new movement of young people, committed that next time they will “riot better”’ (Rigby, 2013). Of course the ‘movement of young people’ sounds too inane, poised to domesticate the ‘riot generation’.

15 Jodi Dean correctly points out that ‘the movement is more than those who gather and act in its name’ – hence those who gather as a radical minority cannot be said to be imposing themselves on the rest or ‘representing’ the rest (2013: 59). She however does not go into the specifics of who this radical minority were. That would perhaps have brought her to a position like ours here.



working class and the restructuring of the social. Hence the fact that the more active elements in the Oakland strike were nonunionized workers is not a matter of detail but follows directly from their position in the relations of production as precarious labor<sup>16</sup>.

### Consensus/horizontalism and form

Let us examine what was perhaps the most defining feature of Occupy: democratic decision-making and emphasis on consensus and horizontalism. Does it run counter to the notion of form we are trying to develop here?

A primer on the NYC General Assembly website explains: ‘Consensus is a creative thinking process. When we vote we decide between two alternatives. With consensus, we take an issue, hear the range of enthusiasm, ideas and concerns about it, and synthesize a proposal that best serves everybody’s vision’<sup>17</sup>.

‘Hearing the range of enthusiasm, ideas and concerns’ clearly means that different positions do not just get a formal representation but actually crisscross and come face to face, directly contend with each other. ‘Instead of voting a controversial plan up or down, groups that make decisions by consensus work to refine the plan until everyone finds it acceptable’ (Kauffman, 2011: 12). So it is not just a question of including or representing particular viewpoints but engaging with each other, ‘working, refining’. Further about the people’s microphone: ‘by repeating other peoples’ words, we are forced to actively engage with them – to actually hear them’ (Muse, 2011: 9). Hence, ‘it is an extraordinary tool for opening channels of empathy and solidarity’ (*ibid.*).

The principle of consensus does not just allow a free interplay of views, but is also oriented towards an active and engaged consideration of each individual position, of all proposals and opinions. Under such conditions, people might not want to egoistically hold to their positions as their own, *my* position. If consensus is not a formal process but a substantive one then it is not about accommodating each individual view, like assuaging individual egos, but precisely one where this

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16 No wonder Badiou’s (2012) analysis in *The rebirth of history* moves at a purely formal level – where social relations do not enter the picture. Perhaps that is why there is so little on the proletarian character of, say, the London riots of 2011, or for that matter the Paris *banlieue* uprisings of 2005. His emphasis is overly focussed on demonstrations and ‘riots’ like the Arab Spring that have a strong middle class character and not just component. These are more proximate to his notion of ‘historical riot’ than the proletarian uprisings that seem to him to be only about nihilistic action.

17 See <http://www.nycga.net/group-documents/consensus-basics/>.

ends and the individuals, in solidarity, start working like a collective intelligence. For this of course consensus must function in an atmosphere of what Graeber calls equality and freedom (Graeber, 2013b).

So a position or line of action coming from one person might convince everyone who then might want to relinquish their earlier positions. What was one person's proposal is now everyone's – the substantive working of consensus and collective intelligence. So a radical position can emerge as the position that the majority adopts. A minority radical position, the maximalist position, has a good chance of emerging as the majority position. Minority position can emerge as majority will and horizontalism actively produces *vertical lines of action that are formally vertical but substantively horizontal*.

Further, 'decision-making' in the General Assembly always took place in the midst of new developments around – videos of protestors getting pepper sprayed by police early on (the incidents on Brooklyn Bridge and in UC Davis, whose videos went viral) suddenly pushed the movement ahead. *The Daily Mail* pejoratively reported on the UC Davis incident with a headline: 'Occupy Wall Street: Pepper spray attack has led to a temporary resurgence in this political theatre' (Fleming, 2011).

Similarly, the radical developments in Occupy Oakland pushed forward the Occupy movement as a whole. Hence the actual practice of consensus is so much about responding to the unfolding events rather than only going through the views of different individuals or giving formal equal weightage to all.

What does this mean? This means that, under certain conditions, a seemingly vertical 'line of action' can emerge out of consensus and the horizontal, democratic and decentered nature of the movement<sup>18</sup>. This is particularly true if consensus is not about sticking mechanically to formal rules where everyone must have a say, and each must appear as unique individual. Dean rightly points out how the Occupy movement had this dimension where 'anarchist emphases on individual autonomy' converged with those under neoliberalism 'who had been taught to celebrate their own uniqueness' (2013: 55). If consensus and horizontalism are not to remain stuck in nursing such quasi-neoliberal egos, then we must be able to delineate how they can contribute towards a more substantive notion of radical politics – one which also involves a verticalism. Perhaps this would be a better way of reviving a communist politics instead of taking politically correct vows of horizontalism and consensus. This is also how I

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18 With a different slant I have discussed some of these questions in the context of Venezuelan Socialism (Giri, 2013).

would like to read Graeber's (2013a) attempt to challenge certain formalist understandings of consensus and horizontalism.

This means that democratic and decentered decision-making can co-exist with the emergence of certain hierarchies and structures outside of collective control; *horizontalism can be the basis for verticalism*. Take for example how alongside the General Assemblies, there emerged the Spokes Councils in order to carry out tasks that needed a more specialized team. 'While the GA is an incredibly necessary body for movement building, it is insufficient for on-going operational coordination and empowered decisionmaking' (Muse, 2011: 11). Hence Spokes Councils were put in place. 'Three nights a week the GA will be replaced by a spokes council, composed of operations groups and caucuses with the jurisdiction to make decisions related to the operations and finances of Occupy Wall Street' (Muse, 2011: 12). This means the emergence of a separate body which is not the movement: the Spokes Council 'is a structure within a movement and should not be confused with the movement itself' (*ibid.*). There were fears expressed in the GA about the Spokes Councils, about losing hold of the decentralized nature of our movement' (*ibid.*). Losing hold of the decentralized movement – was that a well-founded fear? Was centralization in itself a problem?

So we are dealing here with the existence of a separate body, which was not to be confused with the movement, taking key decisions and implementing them: was this (incipient) verticalism violating democratic decision making or was it the natural working of horizontalism, giving us a verticalism which is the unfolding of horizontalism, horizontalism's truth? What we can clearly see here is that, notwithstanding the verticalism, there is no necessary emergence of a reified subjectivity here.

What this means for us is this: consensus and horizontalism do feed into our notion of form, including everyone rather than excluding – and including not on the basis of a minimum consensus, but on the basis of a maximum minority position which would be the 'voice of all' providing the 'line of march' to the movement as a whole. Rather than jealously hold on to positions individualistically defined (my position), here was a process where the individual would identify with the movement of 'strategic determinations' – the individual voice tends to converge with what 'everyone wants', what the 'situation demands'. Hence, *the minority providing the line of march to the movement does not amount to a reified subjectivity*.

## Occupy as a form of power

### *Bureaucratisation?*

Let us recapitulate. We explored ‘spaces of freedom’, radical practices, social differentiation, actions of a radical minority, the practices of horizontalism and consensus, the working of the ‘collective intelligence’ and so on. What they all do is to enable the emergence of a form of power called Occupy. Form shines through Occupy and its many micro-practices. That is why even if ‘form’ reminds us of ‘bureaucratic sounding’ qualities like structure, hierarchy and function, such a bureaucratic slide is not inevitable. Occupy points to such a possibility. Holloway’s fear about reified form or Butler’s charge of Kantian formalism does not always hold true. The political is not abstracted from the social.

That is, the form or party is external and vanguardist only as an affirmation of the ‘inside’, of the micro-practices and decentred practices. As we saw above in Lenin the party as outside is also at the same time an expression of the ‘inside’. The Party then does not really uplift the workers to a higher level, in the manner of an external force – rather the party is the expression of that higher level achieved by the inside, which is a bit like a pre-form form, an inside on the cusp of engendering a cut in its body, the ‘advanced detachment’. The inside already anticipates the outside form<sup>19</sup>.

The inside, the social, was very instrumental in the form called Occupy. That is, the revolutionary reconstitution of the social relations was what was taking place, meaning the 99% was emerging as a force in the class struggle. It is only when this process stops, when the revolutionary reconstitution of the social relations is no longer on the agenda that the bureaucratic qualities of a party’s organizational form become purely bureaucratic and nothing else.

### *Clarifying the situation*

What we are already doing is referring to the question of form as a form of power. As a form the movement now opposes capitalism and the dominant order not just through ‘practices of freedom’ but also through the concentrated force of a ‘form of power’. That is why *Occupy Oakland* is also at the same time the *Battle of Oakland*.

Does this lead to a spiral of violence, to, say, the Insurrectionists as ‘the cancer in Occupy’ (Hedges, 2012)? Does it lead to a replication of the capitalist state and its

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19 Žižek rightly points out that the party provides the space, the realm within which a true break with the determinations of capital and the state can be effected (2002).

reified forms, to a reified, abstract party-state? It need not, so long as the party or form is an expression of radical practices and social reconstitution: the revolutionary reconstitution of social relations. We discussed this above with regard to the bureaucratic qualities. More crucially, in strategic terms, the appearance of the form is the only way that the situation gets clarified. What do we mean?

One report argues how ‘Occupy Oakland has accelerated’ this process of clarification. It points out that ‘the political decisions made [in Occupy Oakland – S. G.] have aided in the elucidation of antagonisms that, within other Occupy sites, are typically more incoherent and less defined’ (Selfcombust, 2012). The political decision was ‘that law enforcement officers, along with anyone who had actively worked with them, would not be allowed within the (occupied) space’. This was in contrast to many other Occupies that ‘succumbed to the seductive liberal logic of equating the police as those who exist within their own ranks’ and hence allowed the police within the occupied space. This meant that, in Occupy Oakland, the ‘police could no longer function as they typically might have, and their subsequent hassling of anyone inside or near the camp was deemed as unacceptable’. Soon it was clear that this one decision ‘made lucid the antagonism that exists between state power and a social movement whose focus rests on economic inequalities that cannot, and will not, be ameliorated within capitalist social relations’ (Selfcombust, 2012)<sup>20</sup>.

Occupy here did not act as this kind of open space of freedom where ‘everyone’, even the police, could come in. Instead it acted as another form of power where the space of appearance of freedom was not possible without definite strategy and tactics. This reconstituted the terrain of struggle, sharpening contradictions and clarifying the situation. *It actually reconfigured the balance of forces* – not from an external standpoint, as per Graeber, but with the ‘99%’ itself as one of the forces, a form of power.

*‘Structural inequality’, again*

Marxists are however accused over and over again of creating a situation where two reified power structures (the revolutionary ‘army’ and the state forces) fight a meaningless battle for supremacy, a kind of a turf war, totally isolated from the questions of structural inequality, class struggle and social relations.

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20 Such a clarification of the situation in the course of struggle only means that we will be fulfilling Sun Tzu’s call: know thy enemy. The point is you cannot know thy enemy unless you are able to concentrate your forces and precipitate a particular ‘crisis’ situation – the notion of form is what makes this possible.

This accusation is totally misplaced, since now the fight against the gap and deep inequalities actually deepens and radicalizes further. ‘Radical’ meaning ‘not use of extreme tactics, violence’ but ‘to the go to the root’. For this fight now goes past ‘wounded subjects’ seeking redress, goes beyond ‘states of injury’ as the basic fabric of social discontent (Brown, 1995). Instead, the movement as form and the emergence of the power of the collective seeks to move past all such liberal-egalitarian bonds of dependence and liberal-egalitarian forms of struggle. Now the majority is taking steps to free themselves from the relationship of dependence, moving towards expropriating the expropriators – the revolutionary masses are getting organized and are concentrating their power.

Here the movement is not about giving form to the opposition to the gap or structural inequality per se, but to the steps to eliminate this gap itself. Form founds the power of the expropriated. It aims to nullify the conditions that lead to the gap – it aims at the expropriation of the expropriators. That is, from what looked like a movement about economic inequalities, Occupy points towards a full-blown political struggle. Here, focusing on capitalism as a transcendental matrix is not just a question of ‘class struggle’ conceived in economic terms, of tweaking the capital-labor relations, or morally and discursively disputing the bourgeoisie – instead it is a question of political power. So we agree with Žižek that we must today focus on bringing down the very liberal parliamentary political form of capitalism (2006). However, the question is: how does one bridge the ‘class struggle’ with the struggle for political power – how does one make sure political subjectivity is grounded in social relations? Our endeavor here has been to look for answers to this question – and Occupy provides us some basic contours of a likely answer.

It is in this sense that we can think of Occupy as having reformulated the question of the economy and inequality. For a Marxist, it is not really about focusing on the economy per se and in that sense repeating ‘anti-capitalism’, or even talking about class struggle narrowly conceived. Occupy stands for *working through the economy*, where, as Lenin showed a long time back, the economic struggle is not a merely economic struggle but a political struggle. This is what we mean by treating the economy itself as the realm of subjectivity. Žižek therefore rightly critiques Badiou and Rancière for overlooking such a notion of the economy (2011: 199).

Žižek however tends to make the argument of the economy as realm of subjectivity rather abstractly. That is where we are here proposing the idea of working through the economy, since revolutionary subjectivity involves class struggle, clarification of the situation, radical minority action, decentred practices, horizontalism, the movement as a form of power and so on. Working

through the economy means to engage with social relations and radically decentered practices – and through that arrive at a notion of the political. At the risk of overestimating its significance, Occupy seems to point to ways towards moving away from ‘transcendental political subjectivity’ without sliding into an economistic ‘class struggle’. In this sense, Occupy concretely poses the question of communism today and reenergizes Marxism-Leninism.

But, in fact, if the economy (and, as we saw, the field of social relations) is the realm of subjectivity, then what sense does it make to look for the truly political in abstract ‘spaces of appearance’ of freedom (Mitchell, 2012: 11)? We are talking about many followers of Hannah Arendt who seem emboldened by ‘occupied spaces’. We can only tell them – learn from the Occupy movement!

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