



FORTNIGHT

# OCCUPY THE IMAGINATION

by tiago mata March 10, 2012

fortnightjournal.com

As an intellectual historian, it is an occupational hazard for me to want to stitch together the present with the past. The New Left of the 1960s bears no direct genealogical connection with the protest politics of today. But I recently compared the global swell of protest movements then and now, finding one particular insight.

The accepted wisdom is that the New Left extinguished itself definitively. Originating in a schism at the twentieth congress of the Communist Party in 1956, its final unravelling was the 1981 rise of New Right of Ronald Reagan, with its promises of trickle down growth and celebration of the marketplace. This was the demon that Oliver Stone tried to slay in his *Wall Street* of 1987. Stone gives corporate finance antagonist Gordon Gekko the lines, "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works...Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind and greed, you mark my words, will... 'save' that other malfunctioning corporation called the U.S.A."

One does not have to look far to find the New Right fortified and still drawing crowds of support. Mitt Romney's Presidential message is to become the CEO of America, a Gecko-in-chief. The state is a corporation, politics is advertising and citizens are consumers. The original New Left luminaries long ago retired from public life. As the world turns in tandem with revolts and protests staged globally, what Lefts are we left with in 2012?

The protesting occupants of Tahir Square (Cairo), Puerta del Sol (Madrid) and Zucotti Park (New York City) make no appeal to compound or double nouns that employ the word "Left"—not even a post-Left. And these protesters are drawn out to the public commons by very different reasons. The struggle for political rights at Mubarak's Egypt cannot easily be mapped onto the economic grievances of Spanish young professionals. Different still is the appeal of campers near Wall Street, who chose to be the "99%" to antagonize the calculative empire of finance with moral accounting.

In the past year, calls for mass global protests have been issued in these and hundreds of other cities—and promptly, bodies take to the streets, without first agreeing on demands or grievances. Yet in the popular imagination, these acts are seen as excerpts from the same script.

Through its diversity, the movement agrees with the conclusions of the later New Left: no issue or agency is privileged. Conveniently tagged by the [sociological survey](#), the protesters turn out to be well-educated young professionals, similar to C. Wright Mills' radical intelligentsia. But I see that rhetoric as becoming more and more foreign. At its most primal, these are all, and only, bodies occupying squares.

The program is to infuse democracy into social life, or "[to see a general assembly in every backyard, on every street corner because we don't need Wall Street and we don't need politicians to build a better society.](#)" The ideal of politically reclaiming private and public space is compelling. For instance, economists want to "occupy" their profession, to [reshape it with democracy and pluralism](#). The desire for unmediated civic action is at the heart of radical politics. It was there in the 1660s English Revolution, there in the 1960s New Left and with us today. It's the closest thing to a universal that you will ever get.

That is why I don't believe the "occupation" theme is an echo of Tahir. It assumes that the Arab Spring is the singular disturbance, and all other events are its ripples. I take the reclaiming of civic space seriously. There are no more commons (although I should say this is almost a trope to be repeated every other decade). There is no place for chance encounters and unscripted discussions. Cafes and bars demand expensive consumption. Sporting facilities require payment for membership, maintenance, or security. Forums are

names given to shopping malls. Downtowns are manicured and policed by municipalities, for the benefit of the tourist or the transient executive.

At best, the commons have been recoded digitally and uploaded to virtual platforms that have not yet been carved out by real estate, surveillance and advertising. At the time of this writing, online forums still accept anonymous participation, and occasional banditry. The persons that have laid claim to the squares in Western countries may have found community online, but they have grown tired of virtual civics.

It is not of apathy whence they come. It is out of a state of virtual alienation. Nothing can replace the raising of one's voice among one's peers to speak of the precarity of employment, of the hardship of daily life, of the injustice perpetrated by power, of the future uncertain. Unlike 1960, the faults of the world need not be documented; they are bare for all to see. Like 1960, we witness a communitarian reinvention of activist politics.

#### HISTORICAL IMAGINATIONS

We have been here before. Not even a decade ago, between 1999 and 2001, civic groups of weak alliance stalked the meetings of the G-8 and the World Trade Organization to protest economic and environmental exploitation. This movement started in Seattle and ended in Genoa, only to lapse from memory and from the chronicles. What surprises me the most, looking at the protests of today versus those of yesteryear (whether in 1999 or 1960), is that for once, the question of the "revolutionary agency" is not posed. That nagging question which so weighted Mills' sociological imagination had, until recently, also preoccupied leftist thinkers from Lenin (1870-1942) to E.P. Thompson (1924-1993) to Naomi Klein (born 1970).


Is this the innovation of today's mass actions?! A call for world revolution without agency?! Karl Marx in his manifesto saw a spectre haunting Europe. He wrote to embody the ghost as the industrial proletariat. The bodies of the occupy movement want to become a spectre, a "leaderless resistance movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions."

In the 1950s and 1960s, the New Left began to reveal its value for political action. C. Wright Mills and E.P. Thompson revolted by imagining a new construct called New Left. The state, church or marketplace would not oppressively define its identity. The New Left instead called for autonomy—for each to be her own historian and social theorist. It was in naming themselves that this collective found partners, and along with these partners came the force of numbers. My race, my class, my gender, my country, my history were no longer givens. These signifiers were re-imagined by argument and mass action in the 1970s at universities and civic centers.

Can we have politics that does not ask these difficult and divisive questions? That is all and only tactics? It scares me to think that we now might.

We are surrounded by technologies of individuation and self-knowledge. Every experience, political or commercial, is now expertly tailored to soothe our egos. Political campaigns do precision strikes on demographics. Google, Amazon, Facebook and every other text miner out there collects traces of my tastes, only to feed me back more of the same. Today, we are overly aware of our uniqueness. It is this idea of insurmountable distinction that to me emerges worrisomely in the slogan of "the 99%": That we are too different to even start a conversation about our differences and our past. We can have a party as long as no one raises these subjects.

It seems to me that this is a sad state of being. It is not hard to see that it denies living politics. The best thing of a liquid self is not to run down the drain and blend indistinct; rather, it is the gift of choosing the vessel that gives us shape. The New Left idea we miss in the call for revolution without agency is that identity politics is a route to empowerment and community. Identity politics is a way of redrafting the rules of society, and of purposefully reordering history. We need the "Occupy" movement to call itself Left, Left X, or Y Left; to engage with that legacy, and once again refine the past so that we can have a future. We need the "Occupy" movement to occupy our collective imagination.

Our public spaces have grown arid of civic action, and so has our imagination. We need our historical and sociological imagination to be reclaimed politically. We need new ontologies, agencies and schisms. If we are unable to forge them, we might actually be facing that long-declared, most feared of scenarios: the end of history. 

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