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Populism, inequality and representation: Negotiating ‘the 99%’ with Occupy London

Jamie Matthews

Abstract

When Occupy London emerged with a global wave of protest movements in October 2011, it embodied and advanced discursive forms that have characterised the unsettling of political consensus following the financial crisis. The central claim that ‘We are the 99%’ staged a fundamental tension, between a populist appeal to the figure of ‘the people’, and a contrary orientation seeking to critique inequality while rejecting forms of representation and identity. This article – which draws on three years of ethnographic fieldwork with Occupy London (October 2011–October 2014) and a critical theorisation of the figure of ‘the people’ in radical movements – follows movement participants’ negotiation of the tension at the heart of the discourse of ‘the 99%’. It offers an account of the conflicting meanings and practices that emerged, arguing that the result was a creative contradiction that sustained the movement for a time, while setting the terms of its ultimate breakdown. Identifying the concept of ‘representation’ as the site of particular controversy, this is unpicked through a number of key figures (Pitkin, Marx, Spivak, Puchner, Deleuze and Guattari) as the basis for an empirical account of Occupy’s practice of assembly, which offered partial, imperfect ‘solutions’ to these tensions. The article concludes with some implications for the limits and possibilities of both a grassroots populism and a politics against representation, in the context of political developments since.

Keywords

Assembly, Occupy, populism, representation, social movements, the people

Introduction

The Occupy movement, which emerged with an international wave of protests in 2011¹, was a laboratory of ideas and practices which have marked an unsettling of political consensus in the post-crash era. Its iconic slogan, ‘We are the 99%’ – raucously chanted in the occupied squares, printed on placards, daubed on banners and tent-sides – began life in Occupy Wall Street, and was enthusiastically translated to London when the occupation outside St. Paul’s Cathedral began on 15th October 2011. The slogan’s claim remained an important site of Occupy London’s discourse throughout the months of occupation and the years of movement disintegration and relocation. We are now in a different political conjuncture, but the events of Occupy London, and the idea of ‘the 99%’, mark an important staging-post in the subsequent

¹ Occupy London, the focus of this article, was initiated as Occupy the London Stock Exchange on 15th October 2011, as part of a global day of action, initiated by Spanish activists from *iDemocracia Real YA!* In the context of the ‘Arab Spring’, indignant movements of Southern Europe, and Occupy Wall Street in the US. The principal occupation camp at St. Paul’s Cathedral was evicted on 28th February 2012. A second camp at Finsbury Square was maintained until June 2012. Several organisational forms from the camps lasted long after eviction. This research followed these over three years. By this point the majority of these had disappeared, though it is impossible to clearly demarcate the ‘end’ of this cycle.

unfolding of populist frustrations and insurgent possibilities. Looking back at the assembling Occupiers, we can see the germinal concatenation of ideas and forces whose ideological tenor and organisational form were still undetermined. Indeed, their reterritorialisation in disparate and still-moving phenomena from Brexit to Corbynism suggest that their *virtual* potentials are still not fully *actual*. It is therefore important to understand the grassroots beginnings of present dilemmas, and indeed to identify the theoretical and empirical disputes that have animated them.

The idea of ‘the 99%’ was the locus of a profound tension between contradictory political modes. It articulated a populist orientation, centring on the idea of ‘the 99%’ as the great collective of ‘the people’. However, this tendency, with its dynamics of representation and identity, ran against a contrary orientation for which such dynamics were anathema. Within this anti-identitarian orientation, ‘the 99%’ did not refer to a collectivity at all, but instead named the fact of inequality, seeking not the gathering of a collective subject, but the dispersal of mobilisation along lines of difference. The conflict around fundamental political themes of representation, collective subjecthood and the framing of grievances, provides critical insights in the organisation of radical movements and the wider reformulations of the post-crash period.

This article offers an analysis of that defining tension and its negotiation. Drawing on three years of participant-observation between October 2011 and October 2014, it bears down on the complexities and contradictions of movement discourse and praxis to argue that it was the creative friction between opposing poles that generated the potency of the idea of ‘the 99%’. Identifying the idea of representation as a central site of contestation, I argue that Occupy’s practice of assembly – not simply an organ of decision-making but a mode of composition – responded to the need to resolve these tensions, but this was dependent on the context of increased mobilisation which ultimately ended. The empirical discussion of assembly shows how these theoretical tensions manifested in concrete practice.

This article contributes to the empirical engagement with Occupy London (Burgum 2018, Gledhill 2012; Halvorsen 2014, 2017; Köksal 2012), and builds on early analysis of ‘the 99%’, which variously focuses on the relationship with democratic discourse (Calhoun, 2013; Della Ports, 2012; Graeber, 2013), class composition (Dean, 2012; Endnotes, 2013), public space (Bintliff, 2012), or contemporaneous populisms (Grigera, 2017; Kerton, 2013). It is positioned between analyses focusing on populist features (Gerbaudo, 2012, 2017; Mason, 2012) and those explicitly problematising the implied erasure of social difference in the name of representation (Arditi, 2012; Juris et. al, 2012; Thoburn, 2015). This is brought into dialogue with emerging debates regarding the nexus of movements and populist politics (Kioupkiolis, 2016; Roberts, 2015).

My argument is original, but builds on its partial identification elsewhere. Kioupkiolis and Katsembekis (2014) posit the 2011 movements’ dramatisation of a conflict between a hegemonic politics centring on ‘the people’, and a networked project of the ‘multitude’, drawing here on Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004). The debates I enter are most usefully opened up by Paulo Gerbaudo’s (2017) argument that post-2011 movements exhibit a synthesis of ‘popular identity’ and internet-age networked individualism, in what he terms ‘citizenism’. This has important lacunae, in part resulting from the otherwise productive desire to account for a common ‘imaginary’ across geographies and times. My ethnographic and sociological concern, in contrast, attends to the playing-out of these problems in a concrete site, leading to a picture less of synthesis than often irresolvable conflicts.

Ethnographic methods could extend somewhat ‘naturally’ from my own involvement in Occupy, which preceded the research. I pitched my tent at the Finsbury Square camp one week in, and attended meetings, assemblies and actions at St. Paul’s and across London. After eviction, I chose to follow those spaces and groups still identifying as Occupy London, explicitly attempting to extend that project and address those problems. I was in the organising group of attempted reinvigorations of Occupy throughout 2012,

attended assemblies and an international convergence in Madrid, and hung out in a network of friendly squats. Through 2013, I contributed to Occupy's solidarity actions within a wider activist ecosystem, participated in all extant working groups, and joined the 'Future of Occupy' strategy meetings, leading to a brief reinvigoration of larger assemblies in 2014. These were three intense years of meetings, assemblies, protests, direct actions, police confrontations, court dates, arguments, parties and friendships, in which I shared in the ups and downs of a movement on the go. Fieldwork ended in October 2014, around six months before a General Election whose result ultimately brought about the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, and a notable institutional turn in the anti-austerity, critical left. My research therefore does not cover that important, but subsequent political sequence. My field-notes across this period approach 150,000 words. I conducted 30 long-form interviews in 2013 and early 2014, plus countless conversations, and gathered all major documents produced by the movement from newspapers to collective statements. While there was a discrete period of NVivo coding and analytical close reading, analysis has occurred at every stage.

The analysis begins, below, with a discussion of the populist discourse of 'the people', clarifying some implications for autonomous politics. I then turn to this paper's organising tension, first outlining the non-identitarian potential of 'the 99%' as critique of inequality, before moving on to discuss the ultimately-dominant populist orientation. Through an ethnographic and theoretical discussion of the problematisation of representation, as it played out in Occupy, I conclude with the lessons this provides regarding grassroots populisms and consider some implications for our understanding of political developments since.

'The people are back'

Understandings of populism vary considerably, but some important points of orientation bear noting. Seeking to go beyond the word's use as invective against one's political enemies, Paul Taggart (2000) identifies populism's common theme as the resentment of a monopolistic 'power bloc', where special interests have broken the mechanism of representation. Scholars committed to liberal democratic representation are inevitably alarmed, not least by the implication of an otherwise unsullied 'people'. Populism, of the left and right, is rejected as 'paranoid politics' (Hofstadter, 1964), or as a 'pathology of democracy' (Mudde, 2003); the *volonté générale* gone to seed. Elsewhere, some populist impulse is understood as central to democracy. Chantal Mouffe's (2000) argument that the notion of popular sovereignty – and its figure of the legitimating 'people' – is inherent to democratic discourse, is echoed in Margaret Canovan's (1999) idea of democracy's 'redemptive' aspect unsettling and reinvigorating 'pragmatic' governance. This is populism as 'the drunk at the party' (Arditi, 2007), interrupting political rule with insurgent memories. This is important if indeed neoliberalism has decentred the *demos* as the underwriter of political legitimacy (Brown, 2015). We may sympathise with Eric Fassin's (2018) suspicion of a progressive populist exodus from neoliberalism (certainly given his French context). Nevertheless, populisms may at least open up the 'politically thinkable' (Azmanova, 2018) in late neoliberal times.

On the radical left – broadly conceived – the most influential discussion of populism has come from the co-authored and individual works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1977, 1994, 2005; Mouffe, 2000, 2018), the focus of a growing literature with the rise of left populisms this decade (Howarth, 2015; Thomassen, 2016). A central point of their neo-Gramscian *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) suggests that post-industrial society has decentred the working class as a plausible agent of historic change, as apparently demonstrated in the composition of the 'New Social Movements'. In keeping with their post-Marxist project of 'radical democracy', emphasising the sphere of politics rather than production, they propose 'the people' as a substitute. Populism, Laclau emphasises

(2005), is not an *ideology* but a *logic*, invoking the great ‘people’ and an antagonist ‘power’. The project at hand is to build ‘chains of equivalence’ between particular demands, and their constituencies, to establish the discursive frontier between ‘them’ and ‘us’.

Others have called into question the progressive potential of ‘the people’. The influential critique of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004, 2017), argues that, ‘The population [...] is characterized by all kinds of differences, but the people reduces that diversity to a unity and makes of the population a single identity: “the people” is one.’ (2004, p. xiv). Such a single identity is an organising principle across the canon of political philosophy, in what Hanna Pitkin (1967) terms theories not so much of *representation* as *authorisation*. For Hardt and Negri, the sovereign people is a usurpation. Rousseau’s ‘general will’, they remind us, is not ‘the will of all’ – the plural expressions of the population, which can only be heard as ‘an incoherent cacophony’ (2004, p. 242) – but a functioning unity produced through claims to representation. This is a trick though: ‘The will, [Rousseau] explains, cannot be represented: either it is yours or it isn’t’ (2017, p. 27). The authors recognise that ‘the people’ has been invoked by resistance movements, but principally to legitimate authority. In electoral politics, populists may emerge from social movements, but eventually separate themselves, ‘affirming that political power is a domain autonomous from the social’ (2017, p. 23).

This position had considerable currency during the alter-globalisation movement. Often associated with an organisational mode of dispersed, mobile networks (Juris, 2008), and the ‘small “a” anarchism’ (Graeber, 2002) of direct action and participatory processes, the representational foundations of ‘the people’ were troubling to many sectors of the movement. In Marianne Maeckelbergh’s suitably titled *The Will of the Many* (2009), the movement’s horizontal networks are characterised by the espousal of radical difference and creative conflict – between particular nodes, constituencies and affinity groups – and a principled rejection of unity.

While Occupy bore this heritage, 2011 also brought claims to unity, identity and representation back into the centre stage of movement politics. From the Spanish 15M movement’s emphasis on ‘real democracy’ to the portrayal of Egypt’s Tahrir Square revolutionaries as ‘the Egyptian people’ (Dösemeçi, 2013), a populist orientation now jostled with alter-globalisation forms. Although the origin stories of ‘We are the 99%’ are contested, David Graeber’s (2011) account refers to a then-recent Joseph Stiglitz (2011) article, ‘Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%’, and Occupy Wall Street organisers’ decision to position theirs as a movement of ‘everybody else’. Paolo Gerbaudo (2012, 2017) has argued that these movements entailed a ‘popular identity’ (Laclau, 2005) casting themselves as ‘the entirety of the citizenry, rather than a marginal group of rebels’ (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 3), as alter-globalisation activists apparently did. For Gerbaudo, these movements combine a politics of populist hegemony with an attendance to individual difference and networked complexity, as reflected in the central figure of the ‘citizen’. An edited volume from Alexandros Kioupiolis and Giorgios Katsembekis (2014), articulates the occupation movements’ staging of a tension between the Laclauian programme of counter-hegemonic blocs, and the Negrian politics of the ‘multitude’, distributed non-hierarchical networks. This usefully affirms the liminal, contradictory position between two different moments and modes of dissent. In their account of Greece’s *aganaktismenoi* they conclude acts of collective speech and media engagements meant the constant resurfacing of otherwise disavowed forms of representation and identity. The emergence of ‘the people’ is the ineradicable possibility of any such mobilisation.

The tensions between these divergent positions on the validity and utility of ‘the people’ for a radical politics played out as concrete problems for London’s Occupiers, who demonstrated populist reflexes *and* anti-representational desires. I now turn in detail to that case, beginning with the first pole of that defining contradiction: ‘the 99%’ not as identity, but as critique.

The breach of inequality

From Occupy London's effervescent early days, 'We are the 99%' was in constant circulation through movement discourse, economic analyses and personal narratives. But what did people mean by it? For Maria, the answer was clear enough: 'I think "the 99%" more than anything else shows the inequality of power and economic inequality in which we live, in our society and globally. It's an expression of that imbalance.' This sense that it is an *expression of imbalance* was echoed elsewhere in participants' insistence that the slogan named a social and economic condition: the reality of income and wealth inequality, and the related disparity in political influence, that is intrinsic to capitalism and intensified following the financial crisis. In this sense the slogan was not a claim about some possible collective identity or agent ('the people' or any other) but was an assertion of the fact of inequality. As Nicholas Thoburn (2015) has argued 'Framed in this way, inequality and exploitation signify not so much *the control of one group, the 99%, by another*, nor even the *distribution of wealth*, but the very *form that life takes in such a system*' (p. 177). This calls to mind Marx's insistence that a given mode of production 'must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is the definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part,' (Marx & Engels, 2004, p. 42). 'The 99%' called out a situation in which capitalism's necessary inequalities determine the very patterning of social life.

Occupy London's founding document, the Initial Statement, called for 'structural change toward authentic global equality' and almost every research participant framed the Occupy project in terms of inequality. The slogan pointed toward a politics built around its critique. This was not a claim about the collective identity of the wronged, and not a claim by Occupiers to represent that mass. For Maria, the slogan 'didn't necessarily mean that *we*... it was a way of expressing the unfairness of the system'. Maria almost removes the troublesome 'we are' – with its implied representations and identities – and insists on the designation of a *system*. These statements reveal an awareness that the potential of the '99%' discourse was a politicising critique whose extension through the everyday social relations where inequality bites is potentially hampered by the gathering of homogenising identities.

The slogan, and its surrounding discourse, aspired not just to a descriptive statement on inequality, but a transformative 'breach'; a critical rupture (Thoburn, 2015) diffusing across the social. In their early response to the events of May 1968, Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort and Jean-Marc Coudray (1968) define breaches as social ruptures onto the possibility of radical social compositions. Gerald Raunig states that this can bring 'uncustomary concatenations [...] it actualizes itself as a new form of social organization' (2008, no pagination). The non-identitarian mode of 'We are the 99%' sought just such a dispersing politicisation of people's lives and the social grid. This echoes Jean-Marie Gleize's (2011) poetic assertion that social insurgencies spread *musically*, through 'resonance' between particularities: 'Something that constitutes itself here resonates with the shock wave given off by something that constituted itself elsewhere' (p. 73).

The spread of Occupy through 2011/2012 hinted at this potential, indicated by the 'WeAreThe99Percent' Tumblr blog that popularised the slogan in the United States. People uploaded photo-portraits, annotated with summaries of the individual situations through which the '99%' problematic was lived: '61 years old. No healthcare, savings or pension. I am the 99%'; 'While my taxes were bailing out my bank, my bank was squeezing me. I am the 99%'; '\$85,000 debt. Two kids suffering so we can pay bills. We are the 99%'. Rehearsing common themes of debt, exploitation wages and insecurity, people saw themselves and their conditions within the slogan's claim.

Twinned to this was the movement's central command, 'Occupy!', which, early on, was all verb, having not stultified into the noun naming the movement's organisation and territory (Matthews, 2018). The desire for proliferating occupations was a desire for 'the 99%' to catalyse mobilisation where the problem it named was felt. The highly visible dispersal of the occupation through proliferating encampments demonstrated the fact of 'the 99%' actualised as a transformative event; the mobilisation of inequality. Importantly, this demonstrative quality necessarily drew the movement into a certain regime of representations. The relay of new occupations offered a glimpse of the distribution of the problem of inequality, while any particular occupation, like London's, necessarily began to fix forms of representation.

It is important to note that understandings of inequality varied. The second edition of *The Occupied Times* newspaper stated, 'We are participatory democrats, left libertarians, social democrats, liberal socialists [...] But on the question of inequality, we speak with one voice'. This commitment to a pluralist process of collective constitution – central to Occupy's critique of politics-as-usual – should not be dismissed. However, the triangulated egalitarianism included both the deep critique of capitalism as such, and a view that inequality had become excessive, but in ways that could be resolved by the policy interventions of the capitalist state. This latter tendency was behind the popularity, among many Occupiers, of *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), a Keynesian treatise on neoliberal excess and the redistributive state. Occupy London was produced by many people with no prior experience of activism, many from newly precarious social groups (Graeber, 2013). Not only did more moderate critiques of 'excessive' inequality resonate with 'common-sense' assumptions about political economy (never troubling the ideological axioms of capitalism); it also spoke to these new activists' personal experiences.

Navigating these ideological differences was a key organisational task facing the Occupiers, not least as differing orientations intersected with other social differences (class, gender, 'race') cutting across the assembled. The need to deal with this productively was, in principle, a major priority, especially given the scale and difference of the movement's imagined constituency. An intense concern with 'process' – consensus decision-making, safe-space communications, and recognitions of uneven privilege – characterised the approach to meetings and assemblies, particularly early on. Perhaps more significantly, differences were partially resolved by the proliferation of broadly autonomous sub-groups with either casual social functions, or 'official' responsibilities for camp-maintenance or areas of political focus. People could work within more manageable groups with higher levels of internal affinity, built on common backgrounds or common projects. This was, however, fundamentally unstable, dependent not only on the gathering effect of the occupation, but also on the amassing of more people, avoiding the full crystallisation of these groups.

Voice of the people

While the insistence on inequality as the condition of life held off the need for any reference to identities and representation, these remained the immanent potential of the wider '99%' discourse and practice. The 99%-as-critical-breach jostled alongside the 99%-as-identity. This tendency articulated 'the 99%' as the mass collectivity of the (potentially) united people. Implicit in the framing of the '99%/1%' antagonism, this could only become properly significant when reinforced by the movement's circulating ideological structures. In referring to the constituted identities of bourgeois democratic common-sense, this was a readily available framework for London's Occupiers, but, as we have seen, we should not too hastily underestimate 'the people's' potential *detournement* as the basis for radical constitution. While this tendency necessarily runs counter to the non-identitarian breach, it is not that, straightforwardly, one of these was 'really going on'. Rather, for a time they both operated as the poles of a creative contradiction.

The sense here was that, rather than naming a systemic problem, ‘the 99%’ referred to an identifiable, if enormous, group. One participant, Joe, rehearsed the populist trope of the untainted people, saying ‘We have a completely unjust, unsustainable financial system. The 1% are the people who profit, the 99% are the people who suffer’. Matt’s words on the slogan extend this: ‘It was a statement of shared identity and grievance [...] What’s our identity? Well, there isn’t an easy one... then we related it to this grievance: We are all the people that have been fucked over’. Here, Matt explains the sense of ‘the 99%’ as collectivity in terms of common suffering, invoking the apparent necessity of collective identity for collective action. Matt’s ‘we’ drifts between the mobilised Occupiers and the population beyond; the greater ‘fucked over’. Relations of representation surface at this foundational level.

This is also associated with an aspiration for ‘unity’. For Ellie, ‘There’s the 1% – the heads of corporations, super-rich – and they’re running it for themselves; and everyone else should join together and defeat them. If we all did, we could’. When another participant, Rob, says ‘You are part of the 99% whether you realise it or not, and things won’t change unless those people make it change’, he articulates an aspiration for a unified bloc alongside the insistence that this includes those who may not ‘realise’, or accept, being so gathered. In the early days of Occupy Wall Street, the problems of this claim were raised by Baltimore black feminist collective W.&T.C.H. who stated ‘If we want to use this figure to underscore how far polarized the rich and poor are today, fine. But those of us that don’t homogenize so easily get suspicious when we hear calls for unity’ (2011, no pagination). They highlight the uneven patterns of poverty and oppression, and the privileges that cushion the blow for many. In the ‘99%’ identity they see the lament of a downwardly mobile middle class who generalise their new-found precarity. Devastatingly, they ask ‘Why say “99%” when you really mean “me”?’ New experiences of precarity are an important dynamic in the re-composition of the working class, and a catalyst for collective action (Dean, 2012; Polanyi, 2002) but this critique of homogenising unity recalls the people’s usurping tendencies.

Explicit reference to ‘the people’ occasionally surfaced too. One respondent, Rachel’s, reflections bear noting: ‘There was so much – not just hope, but expectation. There was agency now, and we were going to have it. And it was all “we”, from the first day. The great collective “we”. The people, really’. This sense that Occupy embodied the newfound agency of that great sovereign agent recalls that common frame of the occupation movements, that economic and political crisis had awoken a ‘sleeping giant’. At its most exaggerated, this entailed the claim that Occupy London was ‘the voice of the people’. Donna echoes the sentiments of many, saying ‘It was literally the voice of the people; the voice of the people being heard’. Such claims were not simply canny legitimation, but were heart-felt reflections of a political discourse in which representing ‘the people’ had real currency.

But the idea of representing ‘the 99%’ came up against the often fiercely anti-representation stance that also circulated. This led to interesting answers when participants were asked to explain the relationship between Occupy London and this wider ‘99%’. Jesse laughed at the question, saying ‘Well, the first thing that comes to mind it to say we represented the voices of “the 99%”, but that’s a dangerous thing to say in a movement like ours [...] But it’s probably the best way I can describe it’. This is echoed by Maria’s response: after several seconds pause, she abruptly said ‘Well, obviously we didn’t represent them!’. This dilemma of immediately thinking in terms of representation, rejecting this, but being stuck with it anyway, should be taken seriously. It highlights the degree to which Occupy London staged an ambiguity in understandings of representation, which offers insights regarding the tension at the centre of this paper.

Representation and performativity

While the idea of representation has been much maligned within a certain activist milieu – certainly among many of Occupy’s antecedents – its implications for critical movement politics bears further clarification. Given the privileged role given to representation across the canon of political philosophy (Daremas, 2011), it is naturally a central concern for theorists of democracy. Its conceptualisation typically centres on some form of substitution, but the precise mechanics are contentious. An essential intervention came with Hanna Pitkin’s (1967) insistence on the etymological implications of *re*-presentation, as a *making present again*, a conjuring characterised by contradiction: representation is the making present in some sense of something that is not, in fact, present (1967, p. 8). Recognising this common theme, Pitkin argues that the term captures diverse social and symbolic processes, with disputes often centring on conflicting definitions.

While Pitkin’s work has notes of deconstruction, Gayatri Spivak’s (1993) approach is explicitly deconstructionist, alongside a Marxist concern with the ideological function of such axioms of political modernity. Spivak argues that the pronounced problematisation of representation in some political philosophy (see Foucault & Deleuze, 1980) hinges on an essentialist error, running two distinct definitions of representation together. These are, Spivak recalls, disentangled in Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852) by two German terms, which avoid the confusion of the English: *vertreten* is to represent in the sense of speaking for, typical of political representation; *darstellen* is to represent something through symbols or images. This distinguishes representation as *proxy* from representation as *portrait*. Through this distinction Marx assesses the outcomes of 1848: as France’s small peasants had not developed a conception of themselves as a common class (a figuration in the common imaginary, a *Darstellung*), they turn to others to speak for (*vertreten*) their interests. The inept Louis-Napoleon can do this precisely because of his symbolic associations (monarchy, surname, title) in the ideological system of representations (*Darstellung*). These two forms of representation are, therefore, not entirely discrete, though they are distinct.

Each has a considerable performative dimension, unsettling any notion of a transfer between already constituted entities: the pre-given represented and representing. Pitkin herself insists that political representation is paradoxical, because the act of representing actually constitutes the collectivity of the represented. If representation ‘makes present’ that which is not, the emphasis, for Pitkin, is on ‘making’. While *the presence of that which is not* appears contradictory, as Lisa Disch (2012) notes this is less stark if we consider the Derridean view that representation is always a supplement, not a *secondary* reflection of a prior thing, but the *primary* moment of production (Derrida, 1997).

In the realm of symbolic representations, radical political projects are implicated not only in the task of depicting a reality but constituting that reality in the moment of enunciation. In his *Poetry of the Revolution* (2006), Martin Puchner argues that *The Communist Manifesto* is a project of performative poesis; seeking ‘to produce the “modern revolution” through an act of self-foundation’ (p. 2). Puchner’s central claim is that while the *Manifesto* depicts the historic potential of the working class, it also needs to produce that fact. It ‘projects a scenario for which it must then seek to be the first realization’ (p. 29). A similar argument is found in Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) claim that Lenin had used revolutionary slogans to extract from the social mass the revolutionary proletariat, as an ‘assemblage of enunciation’ before the conditions were ready for it to exist materially. The performative aspiration of such a prefiguration-in-language, however, always hinges on its legitimacy to be spoken, as demonstrated by the fulfilment – or not – of its promise. ‘Anybody can shout “I declare a general mobilisation”’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 90) but absent the conditions to actualise this, the statement is foolish. As Puchner has it, manifestos and slogans are in a fragile, liminal position between *performativity* and *theatricality*, the reduction to mere play-acting.

In considering the way in which London’s Occupiers were reluctantly stuck with the claim that they represented ‘the 99%’, we must recall these complications in our understanding of representation: first,

the distinction between the representative proxy and the portrait; and second, the performativity which troubles the picture of clearly constituted identities.

Assembly

Nowhere do these tensions play out more significantly than in Occupy's defining mode of composition: assembly. By assembly I mean not so much the organisational role played by assemblies, but the process of assembling an ever greater political collectivity; assembly as ethos more than form. The great amassing '99%', called to participate in the occupation's constituent process, marked a partial, temporally-bounded 'solution' to the controversy of representation. In a movement often criticised for a lack of demands, one clear demand was the command that people assemble, whether it was the call to 'Occupy Everywhere!' or the 'Come and join us!' of the Initial Statement. Many Occupiers saw the slogan as aspirational, associated with the expansive self-understanding of a movement propelled by the global relay of mobilisations. When I asked one participant, Andy, whether people in Occupy London meant that they themselves were 'the 99%', he responded 'I think we hope to be'. For Bernie, the point was to 'include every human being in the process'. This desire to include 'everyone' presents fundamental limitations, but its articulation of the hope motivating the movement is important. The ethos of ongoing assembly sought to undermine any clear distinction between an inside and outside of the movement, as that barrier was permeated by ever more people. To develop an earlier point, Joe emphatically declared that 'Occupy is the voice of the people, so the people have to be there to voice themselves [...] You want a continual influx of thousands, participating, taking ownership, listening and being listened to'. Here again the highly representational claim to being the 'voice of the people' is immediately troubled by the requirement that this people 'voice themselves'. This form of representation – open to ongoing complication through the folding-in of the represented – is dynamic, not dependent on the stable identities of either the mobilised activist grouping, or the people beyond. The claim to performativity was sustained – and the threat of mere theatricality held at bay – so long as this continued.

The occupation camp itself, and the organisational forms it engendered, demonstrated this process, in the way that movements so often render visible particular grievances or social assemblages. Its symbolic function helps clarify the ambivalence regarding representation. The claim to speak for (*vertreten*) 'the 99%' was indeed essentially inadmissible; in meetings and assemblies people insisted they spoke for no one. However, the amassing body of gathered Occupiers, relayed as images through news media and phones, was unavoidably a representation (*Darstellung*), of at least the mobilisation, and perhaps the wider constituency it claimed. This could never portray the totality of 'the 99%', but instead something akin to Walter Benjamin's (1969) 'non-compact mass', a necessarily partial snapshot; as opposed to, say, the authoritarian 'mass ornaments' (Kracauer, 1995) of Nuremberg's choreographed *volk*. The *Darstellung* of the camp was the portrait of a people-in-process. The General Assembly, the centre of collective decision-making, gathered the milling crowds in demonstrations of grassroots democracy: loose concentric rows of people gathered around speakers bearing proposals, statements of solidarity, or personal testimonies, for hours. The General Assembly and the occupation were constantly being reconstituted by arrivals and departures. Numbers swelled or shrank, and the individuals changed constantly. Representation could not entail the transfer from one body, or identity, to another, as neither Occupy London nor the great people beyond, were so bounded. The self-presentation as 'just an ordinary person' by so many in the General Assembly was an insistence on the coextensivity of the two, and a rejection of the activist identity that represents a cut with the social (Anonymous, 2000; Thoburn, 2010).

If '99%' discourse relied on the ongoing fulfilment of its performative aspiration, something it could not handle was an audience. In the early days, I had reflected on the uneasy feeling of marching through

London streets chanting ‘We are the 99%’, as vast numbers watched from the pavements, pinned to walls and shop doorways, going about their normal business. Encountering this spectator’s gaze – from people who were surely members of that broad constituency Occupy claimed – disrupted all performative illusions. The threat of theatricality always loomed, and these moments undermined any legitimacy of this reduced troupe of Occupiers declaring themselves ‘the 99%’.

In fact, the sense of performative fulfilment was always dependent on the ground-level perspective from within crowds. In his commentary on Occupy Wall Street, Craig Calhoun (2013) says ‘Whether in an occupation, or marches or sit-ins, the participation of a crowd encourages the sense of being part of something bigger than oneself, of acting not just as a small minority of the population, but as “the people”’, (pp. 6-7). A similar comment is offered by Alain Badiou (2012) on the ultimate failures of Paris’s May 1968: “But we were all on the streets!” (p. 56) was the common sentiment of incredulity among participants caught up in the ‘intensity of compact presence’ (p. 35). The theatricality of Occupy’s claims was obscured by the immediacy of the crowd; the intensity of bodies, voices and movement producing the sense of ever more people.

This was a problem. The sense of legitimacy in talk of ‘the 99%’ depended on that context of amassing, of one’s immersion in the indignant crowd, and the circulating awareness of events like this taking place in so many other locations worldwide. The long durée of Occupy London’s unfolding marked the progressive break-down of this possibility. As the winter of 2011/2012 advanced, the flow of new arrivals reduced, and people began to leave, or relocate away from the camp’s weather and stress. Occupy London became an increasingly bounded territory, socially and geographically (Matthews, 2018). Coinciding with this, issues of representation intensified around moments calling for people to speak for Occupy. However one might disavow representation, speaking to the media, or in the eviction court hearings, meant unavoidable *Vertretung*. Many viewed the Press Team’s specialist engagement with journalists as an undue concentration of power. These divisions sometimes paralysed meetings intended to prepare for impending eviction. This period coincided with a drift toward the regressive populist claim that Occupy represented ‘the 99%’ through its ‘diversity’; membership of enough constituted identity groups – genders, ethnicities, class positions. As Vicky rather perplexingly put it, ‘We had at least 75% of the 99% there’.

Ultimately though, it was during this period that the cry of ‘We are the 99%’ basically fell out of use. The ‘99%/1%’ opposition still framed debates and conversations, but there was a palpable loss of confidence in declaring Occupy the movement of ‘the 99%’. Expressing frustration with fellow Occupiers at this time, Maria lamented ‘Some still believe we’re this mass movement [...] so we need to be really inclusive of all these people who don’t give a shit, or even know Occupy exists’. The post-eviction period, throughout mid-2012, was marked by attempts to reinvigorate the movement through street protests and to even start fresh occupations. The slogan rang out again when large crowds gathered (at the 2,000-strong ‘Meet the 1%’ march in May 2012, or at the anniversary march that October) but the centrality of ‘the 99%’ had shifted. Its occasional resurfacing felt like an artefact whose fleeting potency came through conjuring a shared past, rather than opening up possible futures. Through 2013 and 2014, Occupy London existed largely as an ongoing network contributing to the wider field of grassroots mobilisations against austerity, climate change and state violence. The political moment had moved on, along with the currency of Occupy-era framings. For those still organising as Occupy London it was clear that this was one particular activist group within a wider ecosystem, rather than the leading edge of the masses. Not that this did not cause confused disappointment for some who had lived those intense early months. In late Summer 2014, three years after the start of the London occupation, one participant lamented, ‘We are open to the world, but the world hasn’t turned up’.

Conclusion

Within Occupy London, the slogan ‘We are the 99%’ catalysed a series of problems in the interstices of critique, grievance, identity and collectivity. While these tensions were multiple – their intensities shifting over time – the defining poles were, on the one hand, a radically non-identitarian critique of inequality, and, on the other, a populist articulation of the aggrieved people. The former sought a politicising breach in social relations, dispersing the mobilising potential of the insistence on capitalist inequalities. The latter gathered difference under the figure of ‘the 99%’ as unifying subject.

The play between these conflictual poles produced a creative contradiction that was central to the movement’s potency, and the wider appeal of the ‘99%’ discourse. The movement’s defining practices – occupation and assembly – sustained this critical friction, articulating *both* the deterritorialisation of critique *and* the territorialisation of identities (‘the people’; ‘Occupy London’). As such, ‘We are the 99%’ could be claimed from the divergent political positions of the Occupiers, and further afield. Maintaining the biting point of this tension required holding off identity’s pull, through practices that defied the bounding of Occupy London. The breakdown of the slogan’s use marks the inability to sustain this, as first occupation’s expansion stopped, and then people stopped coming. Rather than a tactical failure of activists, this reflects the limitations of that moment, and its forms.

The value of this case is first in its dramatisation of the discursive reconstitution following the financial crisis. The resurgence of the figure of the sovereign people emerges as a central concern in the desires and demands churned up by the relay of crisis, bail-outs and austerity. Its salience for a generation politicised at this time distinguishes it from a prior political generation – broadly the alter-globalisation left – in terms of attitudes to unity and identity, and in its increasing organisational and discursive pragmatism. This is not unproblematic. As I have shown, some form of representation is an unavoidable dynamic of movements, so long as the political operates within a symbolic terrain of images and language. But ‘the people’ tends toward the more troubling tendency to *speak for*. It can never be an *a priori* identity nor a real collective agent, but is always a discursive operation and bid for authority. However performative, its tendency is the bounding of identity. In contrast, the politicising breach is not about representation or legitimating speech at all; not the performative production of new identities, but the dispersal of critique along lines of resonance. To call upon a Deleuze-Guattarian (1987) language, this is a *molecular* unmaking of identities rather than the bounding of *molar* unity.

The unmaking of the bodies and forms presented by liberal capitalist ideology and material life is a possibility opened up by crisis. Its fullest expression is a radically anti-identitarian mode of critique, but perpetual flight – pure undoing – is neither desirable nor possible. It is necessary to be drawn into the realm of representation and settled identities, but these should propose new possibilities for how we live, and remain open to further, progressive recompositions. The emancipatory significance of critical tensions, like the ones discussed in this paper, should be of particular concern as the institutional relocation of movement politics into phenomena like Corbynism intensifies the tendency toward more identitarian forms of representation, at the same time as it lends institutional power to certain indignant demands. The ‘99%-as-a-people’ had progressive potential by being bound not only to an oppositional critique of identity that held at bay, for a time, its most limited aspects, but also to an insistence that the condition of life of that people is one of inequality. The draw of dominant discursive forms means that they are likely to ultimately dominate. Still, their disruption points beyond the current distribution, marking the possible reconstitution of life in troubled times.

‘The people’ is perspectival. It can be produced at the level of the street, a usually fleeting illusion from within the insurgent crowd, but the truer perspective from which it is apprehended is that of the state, surveying its dominion from above. It is the state that possesses powerful mechanisms and institutions by

which the (national) people is articulated. Hence, the populist reflex of the 2011 movements has ultimately found longer-lasting form in the explicitly representational modes of electoral politics. While the state can make space for this element of indignant desire, that other side of ‘We are the 99%’ – the critique of capitalist life and the identities it proposes – is less easily housed and disciplined. It remains an errant potential that will continue to emerge.

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