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# The 'Occupy' Movement: Emerging Protest Forms and Contested Urban Spaces

By Judy Lubin

## Abstract

The Occupy Movement represents the evolving nature of contemporary social movements. It employs traditional tactics as well as new tools of technology and alternative forms of organizing to articulate concerns. In an era of widening income inequality, record corporate profits, and government austerity measures, Occupy protestors claimed urban public spaces as sites of resistance this past year. By framing their cause as one driven by "the 99%", corporate interests were successfully linked to a diverse set of economic impacts that united the masses, from diminishing prospects of employment to record foreclosures and crippling student debt. In claiming their right to the city, Occupiers created physical and political space for reasserting the power of the people. Occupiers' seizing of public spaces and use of social media to promote and report acts of resistance suggest that in mediated societies, protests configured for virtual audiences are likely to become mainstays of urban social movements. The Occupy Movement embodies these developments and underscores the need for new thinking on how public spaces can facilitate participatory democracy. Using scholarly blogs and news reports, this paper tracks the movement and explores its implications on the governance of public space and the future of urban protests.

**Keywords:** Occupy Wall Street; social movements; protests; globalization

## Introduction

On September 17, 2011, nearly a thousand protestors flooded New York City's Zuccotti Park in a planned action against corporate power, political corruption, and economic inequality (Mitchell 2011). The Occupy Wall Street demonstration touched off an 'Occupy Movement' that produced solidarity protests in major U.S. cities and over 80 countries around the world (Karimi and Sterling 2011). These protests highlight the inherently political character of the distribution and use of space in urban settings (Rios 2009, Swyngedouw 2009). As stewards of public spaces, planners can learn from the way in which the Occupy Movement challenged the use of public spaces and the precedent it has set for future urban protests. At a moment when the national discourse focused on deficit reduction and

austerity measures, Occupy protestors redirected the nation's attention to the underlying source of the current economic crisis: global corporate interests. A contemporary social movement, Occupy employs traditional tactics as well as new tools of technology and alternative forms of organizing to articulate its concerns. The Occupy Movement's most unique features are its horizontal, leaderless "structure," coupled with its tactic of weeks-long encampments in public spaces. Both strategies contribute to the movement's successes thus far; yet it is the latter that has raised the ire of city governments as they are forced to respond to protestors' claiming of public spaces as centers of democratic action (Marcuse 2011).

This paper focuses on the Occupy protests as a case study of the evolving nature of urban social movements. First, I link the Occupy movement to a significant shift in class consciousness in the U.S. Second, I connect it to global social movements with similar political claims and organizational structures. Next, I briefly examine the impact of the financial crisis on cities for the purpose of introducing additional factors driving urban protests today. Finally, I explore how Occupy protestors are redefining participatory democracy by reclaiming public spaces and rejecting traditional models of political organization. By literally and symbolically seizing public spaces, the Occupy Movement has reasserted the primacy of popular interests ahead of corporations. The success of Occupy is evidenced by the diffuse reference in cultural and political discourse to the movement's framing of the 99% united against the corrupting influence of the 1% of elites who control the majority of global wealth. In an era in which revolutions are tweeted and televised, the Occupy Movement has demonstrated that new urban protests will increasingly manifest not only in physical forms, but in virtual spaces as well.

## **Setting the Stage for the Occupation**

The year 2011 saw decreased prospects for economic opportunity and social mobility, making conditions ripe for the Occupy Movement to take hold in cities across the U.S. The recent economic crisis dashed the hopes of vulnerable populations along with those of millions of middle class college students and workers. As the working and middle classes suffered, corporations enjoyed record profits, often on the backs of taxpayers. On the brink of collapse in 2008 and 2009, Wall Street firms were bailed out by the federal government while millions of Americans lost their jobs and homes. With a shrinking middle class, poverty reached an all-time high, and a record 50 million Americans went without health insurance (DeNavas-Walt et al 2010). Facing unprecedented deficits, many state and local governments reduced or suspended essential services. While the nation struggled to emerge out of a jobless recovery, the extension of unemployment benefits

was regularly threatened by political wrangling. Adding to the frustration was the realization that the long-held American work ethic—"work hard and get ahead"—was no longer tenable. Perhaps most evident of this reality was the marked presence of America's new "lost generation" at Occupy protests. These protestors were young, educated and disillusioned by limited opportunities for work and mounting student loan debt (Associated Press 2011). With the widest wealth gap between younger and older Americans ever recorded (Yen 2011), this "lost generation" is unlikely to achieve wealth or even the standard and quality of living of previous generations.

To add insult to injury, in 2010 the U.S. Supreme Court in its decision on the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* case ruled that corporations have a First Amendment right to spend unlimited amounts of money to influence elections. Then, in the winter of 2011, the Republican Governor of Wisconsin set off weeks of massive protests as he sought to eliminate the collective bargaining rights of public sector workers. Tens of thousands gathered outside the state capitol to protest and many slept inside the building's rotunda in February and March (Davey 2011). Some have credited these protests with helping to inspire Occupy Wall Street. Indeed, many of the issues (e.g., sleeping in public spaces) associated with Occupy's claiming of public terrains were raised during the demonstrations in Wisconsin (Oppel 2011).

Before the Wisconsin protests erupted, the world watched as hundreds of thousands of protestors occupied Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt for eighteen days, leading to the end of the three-decade-long presidency of Hosni Mubarak (Aljazeera 2011). Egypt's political revolution was preceded by demonstrations that led to the ouster of Tunisia's dictator of 23 years, Zine Ben Ali, which kicked off a wave of protests in the Middle East collectively known as the Arab Spring. While the contribution of social media to Egypt's and Tunisia's revolutions may have been overstated, new media tools such as Facebook and Twitter were used by some activists to coordinate efforts and helped to garner international support and intensify news coverage (Srinivasan 2011). Repressive tactics such as blocking internet and mobile phone access in Egypt only served to push more people out onto the streets of Cairo and built a greater sense of solidarity especially among those following the protests through social networking websites. In the US, a similar trail of protests and police responses focused a national spotlight on the movement in Occupy sites across the country, as in the public outcry over the mass arrests of 700 demonstrators on the Brooklyn Bridge on October 1, 2011. The significance of some of Occupy's other clashes with police is addressed in my discussion of democracy in the public square.

## Horizontal Social Movements and Democratic Structures

Occupy Wall Street organizers drew on the lessons of populist movements around the world, learning from tactics used in Egypt, Greece, and Spain to plan the initial Manhattan protest on September 17 (Kroll 2011). Protestors from Spain encouraged organizers to adopt a model of general assemblies for discussions and decision-making, a horizontal organizational structure with no leaders and where everyone is considered equal (Kroll 2011). On the Occupy website, the organizers declared: "The one thing we all have in common is that we are the 99 percent that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1 percent." Critics of the Occupy Movement point to this lack of leadership and concrete demands as barriers to achieving political change. However, for many Occupiers, replicating the existing hierarchical structures of political leadership is contrary to their populist, democratic goals. The horizontal organizational structure is a response to the corruption and failure of representative democracy to represent the interests of the people (Gautney 2011) and a realization of a collective class consciousness.

From the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, Washington in 1999, to Occupy Wall Street in 2011, the corrupting power of global capital over national and local governments has mobilized and brought activists to major cities to protest against international financial institutions and their role in eroding social, environmental, and labor rights around the world (Kohler and Wissen 2003). Thus Glasius (2011) locates the antecedents of Occupy's leaderless structure and the rejection of traditional political forms of organization in the anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal movements prominent in the last decade. Sitrin (2012), a participant of the General Assembly that helped organize Occupy Wall Street, observes that the horizontal social relations of Occupy are similar to the horizontalidad that emerged during the 2001 popular rebellion in Argentina. Social media, viewed by many users as emancipatory tools that level the playing field, contribute to the growth of leaderless protests by facilitating independent, multisite actions (Sassen 2011). New media tools have allowed for virtual or satellite protests outside of Manhattan to spring up easily through information posted on websites and social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. Protestors and supporters created a strong online presence with the daily publishing of photos and streaming of videos of marches and clashes with police. These postings helped to shape the narrative about the movement and increased online conversations (Preston 2011). Nearly two million YouTube videos were tagged with "occupy" in the politics and news section of the site and 400 "occupy" Facebook pages with 2.7 million fans were recorded two months after the protests began (Preston 2011). Despite Occupy's complexity—the movement challenges traditional organizational structures and encompasses a wide range of interests—it

has skillfully articulated its core message, even without issuing demands that critics argue are necessary for creating change.

## **Why Cities? Financial Cityscapes and Public-Private Space**

Public urban spaces are necessary components of the evolving form of participatory cities advocated by Occupy protestors. The world's wealth is concentrated in cities, especially those that serve as strategic points in the global economic system (Sassen 2000). The density, diversity, and function of cities make them natural sites for social movements and protests (Kohler and Wissen 2003). Cities are beacons of economic activity, where the contrasts between rich and poor grow strikingly evident everyday. With the crash of the housing market and resulting global financial crisis, municipal governments experienced a decline in economic activity at the same time that demands increased for social services due to higher unemployment and homelessness. Cities experienced a sharp decline in revenue as many local governments suffered losses from the banking crisis and stalled real estate market (Paulais 2009). Budgetary constraints at the federal and state levels have only served to heighten the financial crisis in cities, pushing many municipal governments to the brink of bankruptcy. These realities foreshadow a bleak future for cities, and for the residents whose survival depends on urban employment opportunities and essential services.

As global economic forces shape urban life, scholars point to neoliberal policies as the source of widening income gaps within cities (Kohler and Wissen 2003). Higher than average rates of poverty and income inequality is characteristic of cities that have succeeded in attracting global capital interests (Hamel et al 2000). For example, according to a report from the U.S. Census Bureau, from 2009 to 2010 the poverty rate in New York City grew faster than the nationwide average, with one in five residents living in poverty (Roberts 2011). In London, the poverty rate is 28%, higher than any other English region (Trust for London and New Policy Institute 2011). A major source of this social polarization is economic restructuring, which eliminated the manufacturing base in cities, providing fewer opportunities for workers to join the middle class. The 2007-2009 recession further eroded middle class wealth and left many low and high-skilled workers in the U.S. without jobs. As economic, social and political conditions in urban areas increasingly reflect changes in the world economy (Friedmann 1986), activists and the 99% have connected these disparities to global processes. Scholars and activists such as Lefebvre long advocated the idea of "the right to the city" as a response to globalization (Purcell 2002). "The right to the city involves two principal rights for urban inhabitants: the right to participation, and the right to appropriation (Purcell 2002, p.102)."

The fate of cities is largely dependent on their role in international financial transactions (Sassen 2000). With urban policymaking increasingly driven

by the need to ensure competitive advantage in the global economy, cities have often been sites of experimentation for neoliberal restructuring programs (Kohler and Wissen 2003). To attract capital and investments, local governments have transferred state functions to quasi-state bodies such as economic development councils and private entities that have no accountability to the electorate (Purcell 2002). Occupiers' use of Zuccotti Park underscored concerns about the role of private interests in urban governance. A privately-owned public space in New York's financial district, the park was created as part of zoning concessions to developers, which included an additional 300,000 square feet of rentable space (Berg 2011). A few weeks after the start of the protest, Brookfield Properties, which owns Zuccotti park, released a statement expressing concerns about sanitation and noted that the company was working with the city to "restore the park to its intended purpose" (Chiaromonte 2011). Occupy Wall Street protestors, however, benefitted from zoning rules that require some privately-owned parks to remain open twenty-four hours a day (Foderaro 2011), the lack of clarity regarding the use of quasi-public spaces for new protest forms, and the visibility the movement gained after the mass arrests on the Brooklyn Bridge. Nonetheless, the ownership of public space remains an important matter of consideration for planners given the social, economic, and political undercurrents driving contemporary urban protests.

## Reclaiming Democracy in the Public Square

Beginning on Wall Street, protestors literally and symbolically reclaimed that which is public (Sassen 2011). Mendieta (2011) observes the irony in the Occupiers' use of Zuccotti Park, once called "Liberty Plaza" but renamed in 2006 after the chairman of the corporate owner. Elaborating on the symbolism, Mendieta (2011) argues that to "occupy" can only mean to "re-occupy" a space that was formerly public but was sold to a real estate developer. Mendieta argues that, "To 'occupy' means to reclaim what belongs properly to citizens and the public, and not some corporation to repossess a bit of our 'liberty.'" Marcuse (2011) notes that in a city as dense as New York, there are few spaces where citizens can gather to learn, discuss, and confront issues of public concern. Occupy Wall Street protestors transformed a mostly concrete park into a public square—reclaiming a once-corporate public space for the people.

The Occupiers' appropriation of public space as a rejection of the routines of corporate life in the city presents another layer of symbolic action. Lawler (2011) asserts that an "occupation is a place where people converse...make their voices heard, eat food, play and listen to music...engage in the practice of experimental practice of radical democracy, and generally contribute nothing whatsoever to the production of profit." This

opposition to corporate culture was effectively captured in the Adbusters call-to-action poster, which depicts riot police charging forward and surrounding a ballerina dancing on the iconic Wall Street bull. Adbusters (2011) originally floated the idea of Occupy Wall Street in a July blog post that called for the “seiz[ing] of a square of singular symbolic significance” while employing a “fresh tactic, a fusion of Tahrir with the acampadas of Spain.” Without permits for microphones and speakers, Occupiers amplified their voices through human microphones that operated in call and response fashion: a speaker addressing the crowd states a few words then pauses for those in ear shot to repeat the statement, allowing others to hear the speech. Through their demonstrations, human microphones and opposition to police, Occupy protestors transformed these spaces into squares of liberty. Here, citizens could freely bare their grievances while demonstrating the possibility of a more inclusive and equitable society.

Sassen (2011) asserts that the Occupy movement and recent protests in Madrid, Tel Aviv, and several cities in China and Chile are examples of the public’s taking to the “global street” in response to feelings of a “collective powerlessness.” While the manifestation of that powerlessness may have distinct local and cultural qualities, the encampments provide a uniform way of making these struggles visible. The occupations also create tensions by calling attention to the underlying antagonistic social relations that permeate city life. By making claims to public spaces, protestors make visible the contradictions in urban life. The critical mass of protestors sleeping in tents juxtaposed against skyscrapers highlights the poverty and homelessness that elite city dwellers conveniently learn to ignore.

Marcuse (2011) identifies the eviction of Occupy Wall Street protestors as a “deficit in the provision and management of public space.” In cities across the U.S., mayors directed police forces to evict protestors from Occupy encampments. The execution of these orders often resulted in violent clashes between protestors and police, leading to numerous arrests. To their credit, Occupy protestors pushed back against these efforts far longer than many observers expected. Due to the visibility of the protests, police and city governments were forced to reconsider their initial response to the encampments. In New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg first denounced the movement, but allowed protestors to remain in Zuccotti Park for three weeks before directing police to evict them, citing health and fire concerns (Calhoun 2011). With the New York encampment weathering several attempts by the administration to disband protestors, Occupy affiliates sprang up across the country—contesting more public spaces and costing cities millions to police the encampments. After nearly two months of protests, cities began evicting protestors in what appeared to be a coordinated effort among several mayors and police departments (Kroll 2011). These evictions did not halt the buzz around the movement, but

rather, emphasized the message of the Occupy Movement and rewarded city administrations with negative press. The seizing of public spaces and the use of social media to promote and report acts of resistance suggest that in mediated societies, protests configured for virtual audiences are likely to become mainstays of urban social movements.

By occupying public spaces, protestors forced city governments and mainstream media to acknowledge their presence. While this acknowledgement may not change the status quo position or result in fundamental policy reform, contesting public spaces may give the powerless "rhetorical and operational openings" (Sassen 2011). For example, the police, claimed by the Occupiers as part of the 99%, employed repressive tactics to evict and thwart protestors. These actions helped to elevate the protests in the national news media. What was initially framed by the news media as a movement of "slackers" and "hippie-types" evolved into a national conversation about growing inequality. The injury of an Iraq war veteran at the hand of police at Occupy Oakland provided protestors with an opportunity to highlight the contradiction of a political system that promotes war in the name of preserving freedom, yet responds with violence and oppression to protestors that assemble peacefully in city parks. The pepper-spraying of student protestors at UC Davis outraged many and helped to further garner public sympathy for the movement. With its intellectual roots in the "right to the city" movement, the Occupy Movement is the latest iteration of an evolving form of protest that will likely increase as citizens of the world collectively respond to a growing sense of social, economic and political disenfranchisement.

## **Planning Democracy: Public Space, Participation and Protest**

Through their persistent presence, protestors shifted the national conversation to issues of economic justice and power relations. Indeed, public opinion polls show a plurality of support for the movement. The idea of the 99% up against the power and wealth of the 1% has been firmly planted in the American public's consciousness (New York Times 2011). While this uneven distribution of power and resources is not a new phenomenon, the Occupy Movement, which formed at a time of great economic distress, used fresh organizing tactics and new media tools to seize and direct the public's attention to the root causes of its daily struggles.

With the eviction of protestors, some have sought to reconstitute the encampments in other locations around cities. In response, some activists and scholars have warned against the fetishizing of space (Marcuse 2011), at the cost of losing sight of the real issues at stake. Organizers from

Adbusters have called on protestors to celebrate their victories and not expend energy on occupying a single location (White 2011). In somewhat of an irony, after evicting the protestors from Zuccotti Park, Mayor Bloomberg asserted, "Now they will have to occupy the space with the power of their arguments (Tharoor 2011)." As the movement decides how it will create meaningful change, perhaps through new tactics or rhetoric, the public and city governments must collectively resolve how public spaces will be used to further participatory democracy. With its successes, the Occupy movement is likely to serve as a model for future urban protests. Given the response of city officials to Occupy, future movements seeking to utilize similar protest strategies may be thwarted by stricter regulation of public and quasi-public spaces, increased surveillance of activists, and heavy-handed police tactics. This need not be the case.

In addition to its responsibility to promote efficiency and safety in the built environment, city planning (and regulation) should be concerned with furthering democratic participation (Marcuse 2011). Marcuse (2011) argues that Occupy Wall Street highlights the need for cities to adopt Public Spaces Plans that take into consideration the spatial requirements of democratic functions. Additionally, when facing conflicting claims on the use of a particular space, cities should grant priority to uses that enable the populace to more actively engage in democratic governance (Marcuse 2011). Similarly, Swyngedouw (2011) calls for a "reworking [of] the 'creative' city as agonistic urban space rather than limiting creativity to the musings of the creative class." This reconceptualization of urban space includes accommodating difference and disorder and "imagining concrete spatio-temporal utopias as immediately necessary and realizable (Swyngedouw 2011)." Occupy DC's continued occupation of McPherson Square in Washington, D.C. may point to how this vision of public space may be realized. As of April 2012, protestors remain in McPherson Square six months after first occupying the park. The U.S. Park Service, which has authority over the park, has recognized the protest as a 24-hour vigil. Instead of evicting protestors, the Park Service began enforcing regulations that allow tents to remain on the site yet prohibit protestors from camping overnight. This is a favorable yet imperfect solution for Occupy supporters who claim a First Amendment right to sleep on federal lands as a form of protest (Progressive Change Campaign Committee 2012). Government officials, planners, and citizens should work collectively to resolve these issues. In these deliberations, concerns about sanitation and safety must be appropriately balanced with the right of citizens to access public spaces.

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