

## #Occupy: Strategic Dilemmas, Lessons Learned?

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*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Bailey, D 2012, '#Occupy: Strategic Dilemmas, Lessons Learned?', *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies*, no. 5, pp. 138-142.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

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# #Occupy: Strategic Dilemmas, Lessons Learned?

David J. Bailey

What is #Occupy? For William Connolly, it is 'better described' as 'the 99% movement' (Connolly, 2011). But even this is potentially too narrow as it refers only to those explicitly adopting the 99% slogan. In the UK, the 'Uncut' movement has arguably gained more traction. Outside of the Anglo-sphere, we witness the Spanish *indignados*, and the General Strikes in Greece, along with related demonstrations in Syntagma Square. There is, then, on the one hand a narrowly-defined #Occupy movement, and on the other hand a more broadly defined movement seeking to challenge – through popular mobilisation, direct action, and/or civil disobedience – the austerity measures that are being introduced in the wake of the post-2007 global economic crisis. In each case, we witness the strategy of occupation as a means of highlighting popular dissatisfaction; of presenting an illustration of the disruptive potential of the dissatisfied; and of prefiguring modes of social organisation preferable to those being opposed. If we focus too narrowly on the #Occupy movement as *the* form of mobilised, extra-parliamentary, resistance to the current restructuring of advanced industrial democracies, then there is a risk that we lose sight of the broader movement of which this is a part.

The (more broadly defined) extra-parliamentary movement purports to highlight, mobilise against, and offer potential alternatives to, the global systemic inequality that produced the latest iniquitous crisis. We've been here before! We might expect, then, that the extent to which we 'fail better' (Žižek, 2009) this time around will reflect the ability of the extra-parliamentary anti-austerity movement to navigate three strategic dilemmas that have typically plagued preceding emancipatory movements with similar aims.

## *Dilemma 1: Between Marginalisation and Co-optation*

At the heart of the debates that exercised the Second International was the dilemmatic choice between, on the one hand, ideological purity and the risk of marginalisation, and, on the other hand, the making of compromises considered necessary to engage with (and

change) the institutions that formed the status quo, with a related risk of co-optation. Whilst revisionist socialists (grouped around Jaures and Bernstein) sought ministerial posts that would allow them to manage capitalism in the interests of their working class voters, more orthodox socialists (under the influence of Guesde and Bebel) repeatedly refused to agree to what they feared would amount to a capitulation to, complicity in, and therefore co-optation by, the institutions of social domination (Berman, 2006, pp. 54-7).

A similar dilemma faces the contemporary extra-parliamentary anti-austerity movement. On the one hand, outright opposition to any austerity measures risks the appearance of being out of touch with both popular sentiment and economic 'necessity'; whilst a more 'reasoned' approach – that might set out a feasible and affordable budget to limit austerity measures – risks the discovery that advanced industrial democracies might *not* be affordable. If advanced industrial democracies are to compete with a globally-integrated Chinese economy that has less regulated, less well paid, and a more intensively and extensively exploited labour force, then it is not entirely clear that workers in advanced industrial democracies *can* maintain existing labour market regulations or (social) wages. Unless, of course, the structure of the global socio-economic itself can be altered.

The Occupy movement has been noted (and criticised) for straddling this dilemma through the absence of any concrete demands or proposals. In the words of Jules Lobel (2011), it presents 'a Narrative, World View or Declaration – not specific demands'. In the UK, in contrast, the Uncut movement has adopted a slightly different response, setting out both opposition to austerity measures *and* highlighting the alternative option of funding public spending through a firmer enforcement of corporate taxation (particularly focusing on high-profile cases of unpenalised tax avoidance). Indeed, the merits of the UK Uncut strategy lie in its ability to enable activists to at once rebut any charge of utopian ideological purity, whilst at the same time making demands that are sufficiently unlikely to be met, thereby (so far) avoiding the potential for co-optation.

### *Dilemma 2: Between Vanguardist Organisation and Disorganised Decentralisation*

Perhaps the strategic debate most replayed amongst the extra-parliamentary left in recent years is that between (supposedly vanguardist) centralised organisation and (arguably disorganised) decentralisation – a debate which also has its roots in earlier movements. The First International split between Marxists claiming that any revolutionary movement required "authority and centralization" (Engels, cited in Carter, 2011, p. 246); and anarchists grouped around Bakunin, who feared that centralised authority had too great a potential for abuse, and thus preferred social unity in the form of a free association of autonomous groups. (see Brauntal, 1966, p. 183). Likewise, Paris 1968 ended with

accusations targeted at orthodox communist parties for their role in managing/stifling the mobilising potential of the people. In the words of the Cohn-Bendit brothers,

... it is true to say that Communists, and also Trotskyists, Maoists and the rest, no less than the capitalist State, all look upon the proletariat as a mass that needs to be directed from above. As a result, democracy degenerates into the ratification at the bottom of decisions taken at the top, and the class struggle is forgotten while the leaders jockey for power within the political hierarchy. (Cohn-Bendit and Cohn-Bendit, 1968)

#Occupy, and the wider extra-parliamentary anti-austerity movement, have generally adopted principles of decentralisation, direct democracy and autonomous struggle. These follow in the tradition of horizontalism and grassroots mobilisation, with roots in the alter-globalization movement. Yet, (so far) the problems predicted by those advocating more centralised and coordinated activity don't appear to have emerged. This, in part, reflects the scale (nascent?) and purpose (symbolic?) of activity thus far evinced, but also reflects what is arguably becoming a consensus, that 'leaderless politics' is the appropriate mode of extra-parliamentary mobilisation. Whilst much focus is placed on the (doubtless) increased capacity for decentralised mobilisation that results from the emergence of social media and so on, we might also recognise the more mundane effect of historical learning. No-one appears to be repeating the German environmentalist Petra Kelly's call for an 'anti-party'. Likewise, the enthusiasm for another long march through the institutions is markedly absent. The question, obviously, is the extent to which the contemporary extra-parliamentary anti-austerity movement can continue to mobilise without a clear and centralised leadership. The answer to which is probably that it depends on what the movement is hoping to achieve, which raises a third dilemma.

*Dilemma 3: Between Domination-challenging Direct Action and Opinion-shaping Delayed-action*

The first wave of feminism witnessed the suffragette movement attempt 'to force the nation to accept that ordinary life could not continue until suffrage had been granted' (Smith, 2010, p. 51). In contrast, the second wave of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s focused on consciousness-raising and the need to study, identify and explicate patriarchy prior to engaging in action against it. These divergent strategies reflect the commonly noted dilemma: to undertake domination-challenging direct action or opinion-shaping delayed action? A war of manoeuvre or war of position? This is perhaps the defining question for the extra-parliamentary anti-austerity movement, with a clear attempt at present to position itself between the two. Occupation as a means of both raising awareness of the injustices associated with austerity, and as a means of prefiguring

alternative modes of social organisation. This has enabled the movement to produce something of an underlying 'media hum', that routinely disrupts any aspiring 'there is no alternative' (to austerity measures, to private property and a privatised existence, to representative democracy, to whatever) logic that otherwise seeks a hegemonic position within the public debate.

It is probably in this sense that the extra-parliamentary anti-austerity movement has been most effective – forcing an anti-austerity agenda into public debate through an organisational form that prefigures (and in doing so highlights the possibility of) 'horizontal' social formations. This, in turn, permits a (hopefully mutual) cross-fertilisation and legitimisation of ideas and practices in more established (and more 'vertical') institutions that also have the potential for resistance (trade unions, NGOs, community and civil rights groups, maybe even some welfare and public service institutions). Whilst the (broadly-defined) occupation movement is obviously not yet ready to function independently of more established social institutions, likewise, existing 'progressive' institutions are too engrained in the structure of advanced industrial democracies to offer an effective standalone response to the current round of global socio-economic restructuring. The task, for now at least, is to seek some kind of alliance between the two forms of (potential) resistance, in a way that both avoids co-optation *and* contains the potential to generate future possibilities for more substantive emancipation. If this all sounds a bit 'dual power', then let's hope we've learned enough for it to fail better this time around!

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