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## Occupying Time

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Susie O'Brien, McMaster University

In her 2002 study of participatory democracy in 20<sup>th</sup>-century social movements, Francesca Polletta notes the critique often directed at such movements, that they are “fine for those with the time and the taste for endless meetings. . . . But, for the powerless or those convinced that change is made by securing tangible concessions from intransigent authorities, it is surely an indulgence that they can ill afford (vii-viii). Poletta’s book, titled *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, examines a number of movements including the Students for a Democratic Society, and various feminist organizations, and mostly defends the slow, diffuse, process of participatory democracy, an organizational form that is decentralized and horizontalist, and relies on a mode of decision making that is direct rather than representative, and based on consensus rather than on majority rule (233, n.6). Participatory democratic forums, including most notably the anarchist-inspired General Assembly forum of decision-making have characterized the Occupy movement, which conforms nicely to the description of an endless meeting.

My comments in what follows take inspiration from Polletta’s defence of this form, but where she comments on its strategic value, for example, in forging solidarity amongst diverse constituents, my argument moves in a more speculative direction. I contemplate the significance of the Occupy movement as an inhabitation of what Henry Giroux, following Cornelius Castoriadis, calls “public time”. Public time, Castoriadis suggests, represents “the emergence of a dimension where the collectivity can inspect its

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own past as the result of its own actions, and where an indeterminate future opens up as domain for its activities” (Castoriadis, 1991: 113-4). This is a dimension foreclosed by neoliberalism, one that I think the Occupy movement has the potential to open up.

### **Global Time**

The critique Polletta cited will be familiar to anyone who’s read, well, pretty much any media coverage of the Occupy movement. Mainstream news reports often include critique of the lack of direction, and perceived illegitimacy of the participants, who were perceived as a band of slackers consisting primarily of students and the voluntarily unemployed. It’s important to note that these critiques came not just from conservatives, but also from more left-leaning media commentators, who would make ritual gestures of sympathy before proceeding to damn the protestors variously for their inefficacy, often connected to their perceived privilege (the idea being that either respectable employment or “real” poverty would make them more efficient, their demands less self-indulgently vague and dissipative). I want to suggest, conversely, that we think about the slowness of the movement, what some have identifying as its frustrating slackness, which is connected to its failure to cohere into an intelligible narrative, in the context of a protest against, and an interruption of, the prevailing temporality of neoliberalism.

There has been a lot of work done on temporality in the context of postmodernism and globalization, much of it focused on the phenomena of acceleration and simultaneity that are a function both of advances in digital technology, and the related shift from a production-oriented economy to one dominated by information, particularly finance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Rosa and Scheurman.

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Resistance to this process of acceleration and disarticulation of time and space has come in the form of “Slow” movements, which seek to challenge the culture of speed--embodied most obviously in fast food, with a deliberate attention to process, sensual engagement with places, things and relationships and an ethical shift to values of personal and ecological health over efficiency. It’s certainly possible to look at the Occupy movement in terms of a slowing down, both in the sense of a literal obstruction of the arteries of the financial district, and a kind of grit in the machinery of the news cycle, whose simultaneous persistence and unpredictability couldn’t be assimilated to the predictable volatility of the business climate. But I want to go beyond the fast-slow opposition to talk about the imaginary dimensions of time in neoliberalism.

One critical element is the metaphor of “flow”. I mean “flow” both in the sense familiar to scholars of globalization, describing the circulation of money, information, microbes, people, animal and things in a world of networks and nodes, and also in a sense more particular to psychology, and beloved of Montessori teachers: flow in this sense refers to “the mental state of operation in which a person in an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity” (Wikipedia). The key element in current conceptions of time—time *and* space, actually, is the way in which the second idea of flow, embodied in individual agency, is seen to resonate with the global.

### **Agency, Structure and the Third Way**

This idea doesn’t just have popular currency; it’s also reflected in some social scientific views of modernization, most notably, the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens. A key objective of this theory is to reconcile structure and agency-focused

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approaches in Giddens's discipline of Sociology. For Giddens, a focus on structures, the institutions and regulations that preserve a certain social order over time, gives an overly deterministic view of subjectivity. Rather than being constrained by structures, Giddens suggest, human agency works through them; structure is constituted and reproduced, and also transformed through our individual actions. Key to this argument is a view of time and space not as a backdrop to human activity, but as constituted through it; "structure only exists in and through the activities of human agents" (256, qtd in Hogget).

Like most social scientific theories Giddens's structuration model isn't just descriptive but prescriptive; unlike most, it has actually been concretely embodied in the form of so-called Third Way politics, developed in Tony Blair's New Labour, for which Giddens served as an advisor, and adopted in different forms by Gerhard Schroder in Germany, and by Bill Clinton in the US. As many critics have noted, the principles of the Third Way, which have become so firmly entrenched politics that they're barely ever identified by name, represented the continuation of Reagan and Thatcher's neoliberal agenda, cloaked in the rhetoric of social democratic values. In addition to a commitment to promoting private-public partnerships, and delivering social services for profit, a key platform of Third Way politics is social responsibility: the state recalibrates its role, away from the traditional mandate of providing a buffer against the most extreme shocks of capitalism by redistributing risks and rewards, to what is euphemistically called "capacity building" (e.g. welfare policy is reformed to remove "disincentives" to work, mostly by reducing levels of support). Individuals are presumed to be rational, self-conscious actors who negotiate their circumstances through the exercise of relatively free choice. If the temporal bounds of tradition once constrained and secured individual life stories, time

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was now, in this late modern period, constituted through individual actions—construed not through the slow unfolding of linear, place-bound narrative, but through the accelerated, reflexive dynamic of the network. The temporal politics of this social model are concretized in the idea of what Giddens calls “utopian realism” (1990: 154-158).

In explicit contrast to a Marxian view of human life as essentially alienated by an exploitative economic system, against which history represents the means of overcoming alienation by overturning the system, Giddens’s is a more synergistic view. Dialectics is replaced by reflexivity, a system of feedback loops whereby institutions are enlivened and changed by self-conscious agents. Giddens’s utopia is realized through the dynamic not of history, but of risk society, in which we all pilot or negotiate our way through a confusing but exhilarating array of choices. The imperative to manage risk brings the future into the present, requiring us to flex our imaginative muscles in response to the challenges we experience and anticipate. This dynamic encourages counterfactual thinking, on the condition that the alternatives entertained are realistic, in the sense of cleaving to the logic of capitalist modernity. The temporality of utopian realism is not dialectic but recursive, in the sense of a reciprocal self-construction of individuals and institutions.

### **The Individual and the System (or: The Union Station Christmas Tree)**

A key lever here is Giddens’s formulation of “life” or “lifestyle” politics, in which, freed from fixities of tradition and hierarchical domination, individuals actively and reflexively negotiate the conditions of their existence. Perhaps the most obvious form of life politics is ethical consumerism, which reflects the idea that buying products and services that have been produced through fair and/or ecologically sensitive labour

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practices unites the pleasure of self-actualization with the work of global citizenship. Like other forms of life politics, ethical consumerism reflects, in Giddens view, both the growing incursion of globalization into everyday life, and the reciprocal influence of forms of individual agency on the shape of the global, maintaining a gently bracing corrective pressure to the system (1991: 214). Within this model there is, to echo Margaret Thatcher, no society, if “society” refers to the precarious majority, united in the recognition of the conditions of its dispossession; there is the local and the global, the individual and the system, in constant reflexive communication.

For a visual analogue of utopian realism, we might look to the recent work of the Montreal-based media and entertainment studio Moment Factory. Best known as the creators of Madonna’s half-time Superbowl show, Moment Factory did an installation in Union Station sponsored by Canadian Tire, billed “the first Christmas Tree Powered by Christmas Spirit”. It was a 30-foot interactive Christmas tree whose lights were illuminated by Christmas messages sent over the Internet. A program searched the web for messages containing Christmas related-keywords, and the information was translated into coloured lights on the tree, “white for social media, red for blogs and forums, green for news media and blue for activity” (“Union Station”). It was possible to watch the tree both live in Union Station and on a website, and actively to boost the illumination effect by sending Christmas messages. The piece—it’s hard to know whether to call it an installation, an event, or an environment—was celebrated for its innovativeness, but also for the feel-good message, powerfully visualized, that we’re all plugged in, our individual choices—even something as small as emailing a Christmas greeting—can enhance our personal relationships while also generating broader social capital. At the risk of reading

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too much into a kind of neat, kind of cheesy media event, I mention it because I think that the Union Station Christmas Tree, and the suggestively named Moment Factory, evoke a cluster of ideas about agency, time, and the social that resonate with the Third Way. The Christmas Tree is a spectacular example of the instantaneous translation of effort into results, of social gesture into material power, buttressed by the moral-aesthetic value of Christmas. It's a vision, too, of a purely generative economy, fuelled by organized creativity.

### **Grit in the System**

It is this fantasy that the Occupy Movement challenges, physically and symbolically. It does so most obviously, perhaps, by introducing corporeality into the architecture of Wall Street. Wall Street represents the pinnacle of globalization as post-historical process, defined by frictionless flow of information, and the disembeddedness of time and space. By contrast, the settlement in Zuccotti Park confounds the time of speculation, speed and strategy with the inefficiency of mortality. In many Occupy sites, official expressions of concern about public hygiene (close sleeping quarters, exposure, lack of toilets, etc)—however cynically motivated, forced attention to a more general social failure to recognize and accommodate human need. In San Francisco, when Mayor Ed Lee declared the Occupy Movement a public health hazard, public health nurse Martha Hawthorne asked “when is the last time city department heads have left their offices and taken a walk through the Tenderloin, just minutes away from the San Francisco Occupy site? Smells of human waste? Evidence of street drug use? Garbage on the street? It's there and has been for years, the inevitable consequence of the lack of affordable housing and years of cutbacks to mental health and substance abuse funding in

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San Francisco” (Cuttler). Occupy camps have over time become sanctuaries for homeless and other vulnerable people, who are attracted not so much by political sympathy as by the need for sociality, free food and rudimentary healthcare. While acknowledging difficulties in assimilating these new arrivals, the protestors have on the whole been kinder to them than the media. Of the Occupy LSX movement, one commentator observed:

We’d be surprised if camp organizers have the experience or resources to deal with the vulnerable people they’re attracting. Social workers. . . are monitoring the situation but say they are worried by the ‘magnet effect.

We’ve been to some tented protest camps – notably climate camp--and they’ve been fun, vibrant places. But also, perhaps crucially, they’ve all been much shorter-lived. With hindsight, it was perhaps inevitable that setting up a camp offering free food, shelter and a free-living spirit would attract people who would be better off receiving help for their problems. . . Perhaps Occupy LSX should consider dismantling the camp. . . before something happens to discredit their entire protest (Holdsworth).

The observation is revealing not just in its naïve belief in the availability of help, but in its undisguised disdain for people who need it; in this sense it is in line with the capability-centric thinking of Third-Way social policy and its determination to root out the moral rot of so-called “dependency culture.” Paul Hoggett, writing of UK health policy under Tony Blair, principles of which inform policies in both Canada and the US today, notes a “modernist enchantment with cure”, accompanied by a “cultural devaluation of care,” and “the devaluation in humanity of that which doesn’t change, or



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changes very slowly or gets worse (despite all the resources we throw at it)” (44). “The attack on ‘dependency culture’,” Hogget goes on to suggest, reveals a hatred of the very idea of dependency” (44)—which is, of course, an element of the human condition which the Occupy movement brings to the forefront, in irresolvable tension with the activist imperative.

What we might call natural limits to productivity and efficacy are compounded by structural inequity. While acknowledging the persistence of differential levels of marginality, the rallying cry of the 99% points to the growing circles of precarity to encompass vast swathes of the once comfortably middle class. Just as their predicament is not due to a faulty execution of life politics,<sup>2</sup> neither can their participation in the movement be read as a form of self-actualization. Interestingly, the media seems to want to read it this way; as Wendy Brown notes, interviews with protestors frequently begin with the question “what brought you here?” Since this question, in Brown’s words, “is always intended to solicit a story of *personal* hardship or calamity,” interviewers “never know what to do with OWS answers that reference a decent, equitable and sustainable way of collective life, a sense of right and wrong, and an account of what we political theorists quaintly call The Good for the polity”. Seemingly incomprehensible to many media observers, it would seem, is an answer to the question “what brought you here?” that opens out into a collective narrative, the obverse of the progressive history we have ostensibly just transcended. Recalling the image of a growing pile of wreckage in Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novalis* painting, famously cited by Walter Benjamin, the Occupy

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<sup>2</sup> The limitations of the “choice”-focused discourses of life politics can be seen in the predicament of the growing number of individuals and families faced with the practical dilemma of which basic necessities—food or phone/Internet connection, for example—to forego (Reilly).

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movement interrupts the flow of commerce by highlighting the jagged intrusion into the present of unresolved pasts and unrealizable futures.

In thinking about the collective here, it's important to note the element summed up most concisely by Jon Wiener, in the headline of his story "Hard Hats and Hippies—Together at Last" (cited in Davis). Labour organizations didn't participate in--in fact they often actively opposed--the 1960s counterculture, many of whose student participants came from relatively affluent backgrounds. Their futures already assured, one could assume, they had nothing to lose by dropping out and rebelling against the system. Conditions have changed, however. In the face of proliferating Right to Work laws, which perversely entail the dismantling of workers' collective bargaining rights, the concept of work, with its aura of morality tied to the promise of improvement, has become hollowed out; it has lost its purchase on the future. The predicament of workers is aligned with that of students, "a generation," as David Graeber puts it, "who are looking forward to finishing their education with no jobs, no future, but still saddled with enormous and unforgivable debt". Debt, as Graeber notes, has functioned over centuries of capitalism to keep the underclass in its place; in this respect the Occupy movement resonates with uprisings throughout history. But debt also disturbs the very idea of time as a smooth succession of moments flowing from agency to actualization, from promise to redemption. The mobilization of debt as a form of discipline depends on the belief that work leads to emancipation: that idea of futurity has been irrevocably damaged, and the Occupy movement is partly about trying to devise another one.

**Public Time/Uncertain Future**

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“The original task of a genuine revolution,” Giorgio Agamben suggests, “is never merely to ‘change the world’, but also – and above all – to ‘change time’” (91). While it is hard to envision what this might mean, at the very least, it points to the inadequacy of prevailing ideas of temporality, which have framed much of the commentary on the movement so far.<sup>3</sup> In what has become a common refrain, Sociologist Claude S. Fischer concludes a generally supportive piece by arguing, “If Occupy is to change the nation. . . it needs to use the moment and move toward a focused, disciplined, strategy to achieve a very few clear and doable ends”. Along with others (Chantal Hébert in the *Toronto Star*, for example), he suggests that the movement must engage the electoral system; that the movement’s success will be counted in votes. Like charting the rise in how often the words “income inequality” appear in news databases—a measure Nicholas Kristof takes of the movement’s success—quantifying the success of the movement in votes is tempting. We need to be wary, though of the allure of the Union Station Christmas tree, which offers a vision of beautiful recursivity, in which a number of individual acts combine to create an affirmative vision of community. We need to heed Slavoj Žižek’s warning:

What one should always bear in mind is that any debate here and now necessarily remains a debate on enemy's turf. . . What one should resist at this stage is precisely such a quick translation of the energy of the protest into a set of concrete pragmatic demands. Yes, the protests did create a vacuum – a vacuum in the field

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<sup>3</sup> Jason Adams attends to temporal aspects of the movement, in an essay that highlights its successful mobilization of time-based tactics (vs. spatially-based strategies—an opposition posited by Michel de Certeau in his theory of the practices of everyday life). Adams’s argument does not interrogate the conceptual dimensions of time, however.

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of hegemonic ideology, and time is needed to fill this vacuum in a proper way, as it is a pregnant vacuum, an opening for the truly new.

This “pregnant vacuum” is a dimension from which a new, public time could emerge.

What this might look like, it is too soon to tell.

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