September 17, 2011: Occupy without Counting

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Abstract
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May 1968, with no-one being able to decide what, if anything, actually happened.1 Zuccotti Park in New
York City briefly flickered in the global consciousness as the spark that threatened to ignite a global
revolution, just as the Latin Quarter of Paris had four decades earlier (Buchanan 2008: 7–12). Within a
month over 150 Occupy events were taking place all over the world and as one expects these days the
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occupiers wanted to relay was both simple and complex. ‘We are the 99%,’ they said: the part that in
Rancière’s terms effectively has no part because the other 1% control a profoundly disproportionate share
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The events of September 2011 will probably go down in history in much the same way as the events of May 1968, with no-one being able to decide what, if anything, actually happened. Zuccotti Park in New York City briefly flickered in the global consciousness as the spark that threatened to ignite a global revolution, just as the Latin Quarter of Paris had four decades earlier (Buchanan 2008: 7–12). Within a month over 150 Occupy events were taking place all over the world and as one expects these days the movement was even more prominently and diversely represented on the internet. The message the occupiers wanted to relay was both simple and complex. ‘We are the 99%,’ they said: the part that in Rancière’s terms effectively has no part because the other 1% control a profoundly disproportionate share of national – global – wealth (the top 1% in the US have a greater net worth than the bottom 90%), (Rancière 1999: 9). They demanded nothing except to be noticed. Although they received support from a number of labor unions, including teachers and health workers who marched in solidarity with them on October 5 and November 17, 2011, they were on the whole chary of being too closely identified with established political groups. Partly this was out of a fear of being coopted, but largely it had to do with the collective desire to create a new kind of political organization that was ‘leaderless and directionless’ (Greenberg 2011: 12). The occupiers confounded virtually every attempt the mainstream media made to understand what was going on. Their silence about what they wanted made the point that there is no
democratic agency in the US that their concerns could be addressed to because all of them are in some way or another beholden to the corporate world. And it was this basic fact of American – global – life that they wanted to draw attention to and initiate a change in what environmental activist Bill McKibben usefully refers to as ‘the political consciousness’ (Greenberg 2012b: 47).

Occupy Wall Street and the corresponding Occupy movement that sprang up in its wake was premised on the idea that change is not achieved by violence or extortion, but rather by presence and permanence. The occupiers put their bodies on the line in order to make their point. Situated in Lower Manhattan, literally on the doorstep of Ground Zero, Zuccotti Park is anything but a park, if by that we mean lush green spaces like New York’s own Central Park or Hyde Park in London. It is rather just over 3,000 square meters of concrete interspersed by a few sapling trees that in time may give it at least the appearance of a park. There are no toilet facilities or any other basic amenities needed to sustain life in a reasonable degree of comfort. So the occupation called for hard living and ingenuity. They were fortunate that the weather remained mild for the first couple of weeks but by late October the first snows had fallen, making life very uncomfortable indeed. Because generators weren’t permitted, electricity had to be produced using pedal power. It was the drive in the legs of determined occupiers that heated frozen bodies and kept the media center going and recharged all the cell phones and laptops. Amplifiers weren’t permitted either, so public meetings were facilitated via a call and response process in which the speaker’s words were relayed, person to person, from the front of the audience to the rear. The occupiers were aided by the fact that Zuccotti Park is a private park controlled by Brookfield Properties, who were far from supportive. This meant it was exempt from curfew laws that would have applied in a public park. Occupying Zuccotti Park was never easy and the City of New York did everything it could to make it as difficult as possible. It directed homeless people towards the park and dropped off released prisoners there and infiltrated the occupiers and spied on them, with the result that several were put on charges. Then on November 15, 2011, the police cleared the park and brought the occupation to an end. The occupiers produced a manifesto of sorts, ‘The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City.’
as well as a kind of newspaper, *The Occupied Wall Street Journal*, which published ideas put to and ratified by the General Assembly, an ad hoc group of occupiers who listened to and voted on proposals presented to them by anyone with the interest to do so. Some of the proposals were practical – such as Adbuster editor Micah White’s call for the reinstatement of the Glass–Steagall Act, which from 1933 until 1999 separated commercial and investment banking, thus protecting America from precisely the kind of speculative lending that led to the global financial meltdown of 2007 – but many were not, at least not in a straightforward sense. Calls that corporate influence on government should be ended cannot easily be enacted.³ But the manifesto was never really that important as far as the wider public was concerned. It functioned simply as a chronicle of what the people were thinking in those heady weeks of the occupation, rather than a carefully thought out and precisely articulated position statement, much less a utopian vision of the future. The true legacy of Occupy Wall Street will not be found in its pages. It was rather the process of putting the manifesto together that was important not the end result. Its production was an example of participatory democracy in action – the set of principles the occupiers wanted to live by was created and embraced by the occupiers themselves. All proposals required the support of at least 90% of the General Assembly in order to be ratified, which is far more onerous than parliamentary democracies anywhere else requires. And of course that was precisely the point: it demonstrated that democracy as we know it, that is, democracy as it is practiced in the United States and elsewhere is a pale shadow of ‘true’ democracy, which is open to all and premised on the notion that only near-consensus can be regarded as representative of the will of the people. As impractical as this model of democracy might be, its symbolic value should not be underestimated. It bespoke a powerful hunger for social justice, for a political and economic system that represents the needs of the many not the greed of the few that not even President Obama could fail to perceive.⁴

One may put it even more strongly than that. It could be said that the occupiers staging of ‘real’ democracy revived the idea that, as Rancière argues, political society is at its core, in its very foundation, consensus driven: ‘[B]efore becoming the reasonable virtue of individuals and groups who agree to discuss their problems and build up their interests,
[consensus] is a determined regime of the perceptible, a particular mode of visibility of right as arkhê of the community’ (Rancière 1999: 107). Consensus is not the goal of politics, but its starting point, its possibility, because it stipulates that everyone has the right to be counted, to count, in the formation of political ideas and decision. But as Rancière also argues, consensus is in some ways the end of politics precisely because it demands/assumes that everyone is, has been, counted and therefore leaves no place for the part who have no part. It obscures, then, the place of dissent (Rancière 1999: 116). The staging of a regime of consensus within a political environment such as twenty-first century USA that does not even pretend to be motivated by or interested in consensus as a political ideal escapes this double bind because it simultaneously performs consensus as an idea but does so in a context in which the performers continue to be viewed as belonging to the part who have no part. Occupy Wall Street was in this sense a highly complex piece of political theatre, but it was also more than that because the effects of its performance were not purely symbolic, but completely real.

There are of course obvious political reasons why certain commentators would want to deny that anything takes place in these kinds of events in which a populace suddenly and without warning or obvious provocation decides to express its dissent, and does so in a way that isn’t aimed at either bringing down a particular regime or taking power. It is hardly surprising that pundits who generally identify with the hegemonic regime would tend to claim that events like Occupy Wall Street are ultimately inconsequential, that is more or less their reason for being. It is a bread-and-butter move for someone like Niall Ferguson to claim that Occupy Wall Street is a giant, misguided waste of time because the real issue of the day isn’t the fact that the top 1% control the bulk of the nation’s wealth, it is fact that there are so many baby boomers around getting ready to hoover up all that free money from social security and government health insurance (Mills 2011). What is surprising, though, is that the number of basically sympathetic observers, including Michael Greenberg (who otherwise does such a marvellous job of reporting on Occupy Wall Street for The New York Review of Books) should find the movement wanting. In an article that documents the way the New York police infiltrated and harassed the occupiers, Greenberg describes the occupiers as corrupted
by their own ‘inviolable purity of principle (“We don’t talk to people with power, because to do so would be to acknowledge the legitimacy of their power”).’ I do not want to suggest that the occupiers should somehow be seen as immune to criticism. But I do want to suggest that the political frameworks in place today are in many ways conceptually inadequate to deal with events like Occupy Wall Street, which falls outside most people’s standard paradigms for understanding political interactions between the manifestly powerful and the apparently powerless. Usually power is equated with violence and more especially the control of the right to violence. The fact that non-violent movements like Occupy Wall Street challenge that very idea, indeed that basic assumption, that politics ultimately boils down to who has the best weapons and the most troops is in many ways the most overlooked (in the media, I mean) aspect of political activism today.

Conceptual advances are, in this sense, political acts in themselves, because they open a space, or more precisely, create the form of the expression for new political ideas (as the content of the expression) and thereby enable political voices to be heard that would otherwise be presumed silent or adjudged irrelevant.

This is one of the key reasons that the concept of the event has been so central a preoccupation for critical theory for the past decade or more; it is starting point for any inquiry about ‘what happened?’ Of the several philosophers who have given thought to the concept of the event, the most influential – in critical theory, at least – are undoubtedly Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze. The event is a crucial concern for both, but they each approach it quite differently. At the risk of grossly oversimplifying their respective arguments, I will try to generalize the difference between them as follows. For Badiou the event gives rise to truth (it is truth’s condition), whereas for Deleuze it gives rise to sense (it is sense’s condition). Badiou’s event, as a truth-event, demands our commitment – it therefore hovers on the border between conscious and unconscious, voluntary and involuntary, that which we choose to do and that which we feel compelled to do. Our commitment to a particular truth is not so much a rational decision based upon the weighing up of evidence as a lightning strike, an epiphany that hits us and in an instant reshapes our view of the world. Badiou tends to give mathematical
examples to explain what he means by truth because for him the real quality of a truth is its inarguable nature: a triangle has three sides, a square has four, and so on. Similarly, one could look to physics, and the various laws formulated there: gravity means everything must fall. It is an open question, it seems to me, whether any political idea can attain a comparable status, but for Badiou this is what conviction would mean in a political context: the unshakeable belief in the rectitude of a particular idea and the concomitant clarity of perception this conviction affords (Badiou 2012: 60–61).

For Deleuze, too, the event is a kind of lightning strike, but it demands only that we adapt to it. It does not demand our conviction, or even our belief. The event for Deleuze is an eruption of immanence, if you will, a bursting forth of a kind of immanent time-space continuum in which something transcendent (sense) appears. In a late essay, published after his death, Deleuze even called this type of eruption of immanence ‘life’ (Buchanan 2006). In his work with Guattari, space was usually referred to as smooth space (but it had other names as well – the body without organs, the plane of immanence, the plane of composition, the plateau and so on). This life-sense as we may perhaps call it (to distinguish it from ordinary or semantic sense) has a structuring effect inasmuch as it gives shape to the world as we live and experience it. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s notion of ‘the crack’ is, for Deleuze and Guattari, something of a touchstone example of what they mean by the event. It is a kind of mental ‘clean break,’ a ‘brain snap’ as some people say, after which nothing is the same. Examples of cracks might include the realization that one’s job is worthless and not deserving of the effort you put into it, or that you aren’t as talented as you once thought (which was Fitzgerald’s feeling), and so on (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 198–200). This is by no means at odds with anything Badiou says about the event, except that for Deleuze this eruption of immanence (the opening up of a smooth space in other words) does not necessarily correlate with an idea of truth. It is also worth noting that the event for Deleuze and Guattari is not measured by a change in the state of things – a large crowd gathering in a public square in Cairo or camping out in New York City is not intrinsically an event in Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking. It only becomes recognizable as an event if it brings about a transformation of thought itself, if it yields a
new idea, a new way of acting. And I would argue that is precisely what Occupy did: it opened up a new space of thought.

In contrast to Badiou’s truth-event, Deleuze and Guattari’s smooth space of thought, or life-sense, is not universal or universalizable. The crack Fitzgerald experiences is a truth for him, but not for anyone else, not even Zelda Fitzgerald, who experienced her own crack. It is his sense of his world, not anyone else’s. That’s why we call it his life. And even if we empathize with his outlook on things and feel that it somehow describes our own world too, that it has something to say about our own life, it is a not a truth we can be faithful to in Badiou’s sense (as he applies it to ideological worldviews like communism, for instance). I can believe in the existence or occurrence of the crack (‘clean break,’ ‘brain snap,’ etc.) in someone’s life, but only in a formal sense. The specific content of someone else’s crack will always elude me because as Tolstoy more or less said we’re all unhappy, that is to say, broken or cracked, in our own way. What pushes me over the edge does not have to be the same as whatever pushes another person over the edge for us to both say we’ve experienced a crack. Yet for that very reason our respective experiences of cracking are only comparable in an abstract way. This is not to say that for Deleuze and Guattari there are no such thing as collective events, or events that affect more than one person, but it does mean that universality cannot be one of its defining criteria, as it is for Badiou. The other difference is that for Deleuze and Guattari the life-sense event is involuntary – Fitzgerald doesn’t choose to accept or adhere to the crack, it comes up upon him without him knowing about it in advance and leaves him a changed man in its wake. For Badiou, in contrast, the event requires our fidelity, we have to choose to believe in it and place it at the center of our lives.

The event for Deleuze and Guattari is a radical break with the normal continuity of things that at once interrupts the usual flow of daily life and initiates its own counter-flow. This was precisely what Occupy Wall Street did: it brought about a radical break with the normal continuity of daily life, not just in lower Manhattan, but globally, as the whole world stopped to see what was happening there. That it could do so without violence or even the threat of violence is remarkable, particularly in an era that is in many ways defined by the so-called ‘War on Terror,’ which had its beginnings – Ground Zero – a short distance from Zuccotti Park.
Having said that, it is important to see that Occupy Wall Street’s non-violent approach, the so-called passive resistance it exercised, is anything but passive. It is a misnomer that robs the non-violent approach to protest of its core, namely the galvanizing effect of a desire for change. As Perry Anderson writes, Ghandi himself translated *satyagraha* as ‘truth-force’ rather than passive resistance. Inspired by Tolstoy, Ghandi coined this neologism himself to conceive a vision of non-violent resistance infused with a religious idea of transcendence (Anderson 2012: 6). For Badiou, this is precisely how an event like Occupy Wall Street works. It ignites what he calls a ‘truth process’ – it makes apparent to all that ‘human animals are capable of bringing into being justice, equality, and universality (the practical presence of what the Idea can do). It is perfectly apparent that a high proportion of political oppression consists in the unremitting negation of this capacity’ (Badiou 2012: 87).

The fact that people take the trouble to interrupt their own lives to commence and participate in an occupy movement and do so in substantial numbers is living proof that in the words of the anti-WTO protesters from the decade before Occupy Wall Street, ‘another world is possible.’ What counts is the act, the willingness to disrupt one’s own life and beyond that the lives of others, and beyond that the life of the social machine itself. As Badiou puts it, speaking of the occupation of Cairo’s Tahrir Square in January 2011, which sparked the Arab Spring: even if the occupiers ‘are a million strong, that still does not represent many of the 80 million Egyptians. In terms of electoral numbers it is a guaranteed fiasco! But this million, present in this site, is enormous if we stop measuring the political impact (as in voting) by inert, separated number’ (Badiou 2012: 58). Deleuze and Guattari call this space one occupies without counting ‘smooth space,’ which they contrast to ‘striated space.’ In what follows I will argue that Occupy Wall Street can usefully be thought of as having created a new kind of smooth space. Ironically, it is perhaps Badiou who, while severely critical of Deleuze’s attachment to the concept of the virtual, gives us the most useful illustration of precisely what is meant here by smooth space. Speaking of Spain’s *indignados*, the loose social movement which arose in response to the ‘austerity measures’ the Spanish government was forced to impose by the European Central Bank as a condition of its debt relief (following the global financial crisis
of 2007 and the resulting meltdown of the euro), Badiou argues that as noble as their cause is, because it is fuelled only by negative emotions – a desire for ‘real democracy’ to replace the ‘bad democracy’ they have to live with – their movement isn’t as powerful or as sustainable as it would be if it were underpinned by an ‘affirmative Idea’ (Badiou 2012: 97). The Idea, Badiou says, is blind to the self-evidence of what is before it – the local defeats, as in the case of Occupy Wall Street, which was rousted out of Zuccotti Park after only two months – and far-sighted concerning the future that no-one else has eyes to see – it isn’t concerned with results, with counting in the here and now, what it awakens is the force of History itself, the certainty that nothing – not even capitalism – is forever (Badiou 2012: 98–9).

Now, I would not want to say that smooth space is identical with Badiou’s conception of the Idea, but I do want to make the point that it is both conceptual and historical in nature. Take for example Deleuze and Guattari’s key exhibit, Paul Virilio’s concept of the ‘fleet in being.’ At a certain point in history, naval commanders arrived at the idea that the ocean could be dominated by the superior mobility of forces and the power to interdict the mobility of others rather than through the control of fixed positions. This idea, which was fully an event in both Badiou’s and Deleuze’s terms, was communicated from sea to land to air to space. Now war in all its modalities is informed by this idea. There have been moments when this idea has seemed out of step with history. Germany’s Schlieffen Plan to sweep across Western Europe came horribly unstuck in 1914 when their planned war of mobility was unseated by the twin powers of the machine gun and barbed wire and turned into a standstill war of attrition claiming the lives of millions. But almost as soon as the first trenches were dug the opposing forces began scheming to regain the power of mobility and within the space of a few years solutions were found: tanks and airplanes rendered the gridlocked space of the battlefield smooth all over again. In this way a new pattern of action was set in motion: striated space was to be defeated by technological advancement. But within a few decades, by the time of the Vietnam War, if not sooner, this model was also brought unstuck. Today, the incredible mobility of high-tech weapons is countered by the fluidity of the identity of the enemy. The unseen and unknown enemy compels the one who seeks
them to give up at least some of their mobility for the apparent security of checkpoints and surveillance procedures. In each instance, the Idea of space dominated by mobility remains very much alive (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 480).

It is this power – the power of an Idea as a force that shatters or cracks the status quo and lets in a new kind of light, one that hasn’t shone there before – that is the key to understanding Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of smooth space. Let me offer a different example that will hopefully bring it into even sharper relief. I would claim that smooth space is comparable to David Harvey’s conception of the urban commons. He argues that the 2011 occupations of Syntagma Square in Athens, Tahrir Square in Cairo, and the Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona transformed these public places into latter day variations of the medieval idea of the commons. Importantly, although these spaces are all physical places that one can go and visit, the urban commons itself is not, it is a social relation, and that is precisely how smooth space should be understood I believe. Harvey writes: ‘The common is not to be constructed, therefore, as a particular kind of thing, asset or even social process, but as an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular well-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood. There is, in effect, a social practice of commoning’ (Harvey 2012: 73). The key to commoning, as Harvey sees it, is that it removes the relation between a group and a space from commodity exchange: the commons is off-limits to the market. This amounts to saying the commons is a virtual space as Deleuze and Guattari would put it and that the virtual space of the commons is produced by the occupiers of that space, which is an important clarification of what Deleuze and Guattari mean by smooth space.

Virtual does not mean unreal, as Deleuze and Guattari often remind us. The virtual is fully real, as real as an idea, an image, and an innovation, is real. It is real because its effects are real. Here one might think of Jameson’s frequently made point about the need to keep alive what he calls the utopian imagination: without bold ideas for the future, that is, ideas which envisage a break – a disruption, as Jameson calls it – with the present state of affairs we are condemned to simply let things continue as they are. And this, as Walter Benjamin rightly said, is the real emergency.
The smooth space may not suffice to save us, as Deleuze and Guattari caution, but it does at least apply the handbrake to history and that may just be enough.

Works Cited


Notes

1. In November 2011, Nicholaus Mills from The Guardian in the UK helpfully published a cross-section of opinions from prominent cultural and political pundits, spanning the spectrum from Naomi Klein to Niall Ferguson. See also the April 2, 2012, issue of The Nation, which similarly carries a round-up of opinion on the occupy movement, albeit all from a left perspective.
2. Details of living conditions are drawn from Greenberg (2011).


4. In a speech given on December 6, 2011, at Osawatomie, Kansas, President Obama said that the issues identified by the Occupy Wall Street movement were the ‘defining issues of our time’ (Greenberg 2012b: 46).

5. As they observe, following Gabriel Tarde, the French revolution began when peasants stopped doffing their caps to the aristocracy, not when the heads began to roll (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 216).

6. In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari describe this counter-flow as a ‘witches’ flight.’

7. In an interesting twist of history, the Phillip Glass opera based on the life of Ghandi, Satyagraha, was playing at the Lincoln Center in New York for much of the period of Occupy Wall Street’s tenancy at Zuccotti Park. See Greenberg (2012b: 46).