

<https://gegen-kapital-und-nation.org/en/occupy-process/>

Occupy's Process – On the politics of a-politics

In many respects the Occupy movement is similar to other protest movements in recent years. Just as anti-globalisation activists, social forums on all levels from the continent to the local area, or anti-war movements against any war waged by the US and its allies, the Occupy movement posits the ideals of this society (freedom, equality, justice) against its reality.¹

To point out the fallacies and mistakes behind upholding these ideals and to explain the capitalist reality is an important task for those not content with the status quo. However, it seems the reaction from this Left is characterised either by uncritical excitement about things kicking off or dismissing these protests as yet more middle class nonsense without much engagement with what the movement actually is about.

The latter position is perhaps reinforced by the fact that conspiracy theorists such as those from Zeitgeist also took to the squares as part of this movement. Yet, this is not a reason to not take the movement seriously and to fail to engage with its content, demands and forms. Instead, it is necessary to analyse (and possibly to critique) every social movement as what it is.

However, in this piece we do not want to take the Occupy movement as merely the most recent example of protest movements upholding the ideals of this society. Hence, here, we will not focus on pointing out what is wrong with ideals of justice, with imagining this society as a harmonic community project, and with singling out the banks and with appeals to the state.² Instead, we want to focus on what is generally taken to be the key “innovation” of the Occupy movement: its openness, facilitated by new forms of communication. One should not underestimate the relevance of this aspect of Occupy. The explicit political content of this movement might differ from country to country, even from city to city, to some extent. Sure, these activists all think banks are somehow mean, but a Left-wing critique of the FED in the US perhaps has more in common with the Libertarian Party there than with ATTAC, the TUC or even Occupy London in Europe. With regard to the “how” there seems to be more agreement – with pride and excitement one is pointed to Spanish “assembleas”, a kind of open meeting, as an example of “real democracy”.

One document being pointed to is a “Quick guide on group dynamics in people’s assemblies” written by Spanish 15-M activists.³ While it is meant to be a methodological guide to running people’s assemblies, it reveals a lot about the content of these protests.

“To our understanding, Collective Thinking is diametrically opposed to the kind of thinking propounded by the present system. This makes it difficult to assimilate and apply. Time is needed, as it involves a long process. When faced with a decision, the normal response of two people with differing opinions tends to be confrontational. They each defend their opinions with the aim of convincing their opponent, until their opinion has won or, at most, a compromise has been reached.

The aim of Collective Thinking, on the other hand, is to construct. That is to say, two people with differing ideas work together to build something new. The onus is therefore not on my idea or yours; rather it is the notion that two ideas together will produce something new, something that neither of us had envisaged beforehand.”

The new movement distinguishes itself from the rest of the political world – first and foremost – not through a different content but through its methods: from conflicting positions, something common ought to be worked out. Clearly, it does often happen that discussions are unnecessarily aggressive and far from being about the better argument. So far, so bad, so correct. However, from this the authors of the “quick guide” take that there cannot be disagreements which are grounded objectively. Neither the authors nor their various proponents and copycats think that there might be positions which exclude each other, that there can be good reasons for serious disagreement.

“This focus requires of us that we actively listen, rather than merely be preoccupied with preparing our response.

Collective Thinking is born when we understand that all opinions, be these opinions our own or others’, need to be considered when generating consensus and that an idea, once it has been constructed indirectly, can transform us.”

If we were to take this statement at face value, there is practically no disagreement that cannot be turned into a consensus by patient listening. Against this, however, it is worth pointing out that the rejection of a position can be based on careful listening and on taking the other side seriously. In fact, it should. Yet, these activists have a peculiar answer to the question of where these disagreements come from:

“What is a People’s Assembly? It is a participatory decision-making body which works towards consensus. The Assembly looks for the best arguments to take a decision that reflects every opinion – not positions at odds with each other as what happens when votes are taken. It must be pacific, respecting all opinions: prejudice and ideology must [be] left at home. An Assembly should not be centred around an ideological discourse; instead it should deal with practical questions: What do we need? How can we get it?”

We are hence asked to sharply distinguish between “ideology” and practical questions. We may assume that the former is meant both generally (all explicitly political ideas) as well as derogatively: ideology is used as a term for the ideas of people who are too insistent on their line. However, while the distinction between, for example, the practical question of how to abolish the state and “Anarchist ideology” is not cleared up, a new way of making decisions is already presented as an alternative to Parliament.⁴

This conviction that all positions are in principle capable of consensus comes about because the movement’s idealism of democracy works without any concept of interest.⁵ For this critique parliamentary democracy is not “real” enough. That is, when it comes to the decisions, which the state’s political organs are entitled to make by the state’s law, then protesting citizens in Spain and the UK feel overlooked. The true moment in this sentiment is that indeed this society does not ask for everybody’s consent but is based on domination. Yet, when pressed for reasons for this disregard of their opinions, all these angry democrats have to offer is that not everybody is invited to contribute. It is a problem of process. Hence, not all solutions for whatever problem is on the

table are heard. Yet, there is no agreement of interests, for example, between anti-cuts marchers and the government when it comes to austerity measures. They simply will not agree on whether mass impoverishment is a problem in itself, or instead a solution to the problem of making a successful national economy and a mighty state.

The Occupy movement wants the people – the “99%” – to really determine the course of action. While parliamentary democracy would create oppositions, assemblies allow the people to form into a community with common interests. The will of the people is not a rhetorical device for this movement: for them, this genuine will of the collective really exists. However, it is constantly distorted by special interests: “We demand an end to ... our democracy representing corporations instead of the people.”⁶

When employees and employers do not find common ground on the question of whether wages should be higher or lower or whether labour time should be shorter or longer, this is not because they do not know the right “gestures used to express common opinion of the assembly”. The pursuit of success under capitalism produces fundamentally conflicting interests.⁷ The competition of capitalists for markets and of workers for jobs is not something that could ever be resolved with a new form of communication, not to mention conflicts between states or workers and capitalists.

These new forms of communication express a confusion between outrage and critique. Everyone can – as an affected party – present his or her personal concern and can enrich the assembly with his or her personal anger. The task is not to fight for specific interests but to show, through the medium of assembly and camping, that a majority of concerned citizens come together here.

The movement is so open for everything that it does not know what the common denominator of all participants is. Here, too, new forms of communication ought to help:

“We use Positive Speech avoiding negative statements which close the door to constructive debate. It is a less aggressive and more conciliatory type of communication. It is useful to open a debate with the points that unite before dealing with the points that separate. Examples:
(1) ‘Don’t touch that dog or it will bite you’ could be phrased as ‘Be careful with that dog because it could bite you and neither of us would like that.’
(2) ‘If we don’t reach a consensus here all efforts will go to waste’ could be phrased as ‘It’s important we reach a consensus in this point or we could end up losing strength as a group and nobody wants that to happen.’”

Any restriction to a concrete analysis, critique or programme would deprive the movement of its strength and special quality to be “open to all” and nobody wants that to happen.

¹ This in itself is not surprising. After all, almost all political forces in bourgeois societies uphold these ideals.

² We wrote about the opposition of “our economy” to “the banks” in <http://antinational.org/en/poor-future>; we wrote about calls to impoverish other people in the name of justice in “Benefit envy without benefit” and about freedom and equality in “Liberté, Égalité and such matters” in this issue.

³ Commission for Group Dynamics in Assemblies of the Puerta del Sol Protest Camp (Madrid), Quick guide on group dynamics in people’s assemblies, <http://>

takethesquare.net/2011/07/31/quick-guide-on-group-dynamics-in-peoples-assemblies/ (last access 12. February 2013). If not specified otherwise, all quotes are taken from this piece.

4 The sentiment to “leave ideologies at home” probably has resonance with many activists. Especially anyone who has ever been on the receiving end of a, say, Trotskyist party recruitment drive with their campaign or those who were confronted with a not so constructive critique by ultra-left critics like, say, us. Yet, in either case, the distinction is not between “ideology” (theory) and “non-ideology” (practical questions). These practical questions are expressions of theoretical verdicts themselves.

5 For those quick on the Ctrl-F, the word interest does indeed appear in the document. However, when it does it is about mutual or common interest. Partial interests do not appear.

6 <http://occupylondon.org.uk/about> (last access 12. February 2013).

7 In “Why anti-national?” available at <http://antinational.org/en/why-anti-national>

we explain the production of conflicting interests under the rule of private property as a step to explain the appeal of national unity.