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# Preface to “Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience”

W. J. T. Mitchell

If journalism is the first draft of history, the following essays might be described as a stab at a second draft. It is an attempt by three scholars from different disciplines, with sharply contrasting methodologies, to provide an account of the protest movements of 2011, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street. We deploy the perspectives of ethnography, political thought, and iconology in an effort to produce a multidimensional picture of this momentous year of revolutions, uprisings, mass demonstrations, and—most centrally—the occupations of public space by protest movements.

The structure of this dossier might be described as three concentric circles of history, moving from highly particular events in New York’s Zuccotti Park, to a more general reflection on the historic novelty of the Occupy Movement in relation to the present state of American politics, to a global reflection on the role of media, images, and public space in the whole cycle of uprisings that spread like a virus across the Middle East to Europe, the United States, and beyond. Anthropologist Michael Taussig provides a thick description of the lived experience of Zuccotti Park, its scenes, sayings, and rituals. Political theorist Bernard Harcourt analyzes the refusal of Occupy Movements to produce charismatic leaders and lists of demands as a form of “political disobedience” that goes beyond the tradition of civil disobedience. I discuss the role images, media, and public spaces play in linking specific places and events to a larger sphere of global circulation.

As a totality, these essays aim to assess the precise character of a movement that is still in process and whose outcome is unclear. There will surely

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be third and fourth drafts to come and surprises that cannot be anticipated. Nevertheless, it did seem useful to take stock and provide an account of the Occupy Movement during a season of relative dormancy—the winter (2012) of discontent and quiet gestation, a time for winter soldiers, not sunshine patriots, to echo Thomas Paine. Revolutions have always been framed, not only in terms of radically new turns in history, but also in images of return and the cycle of seasons. The Arab Spring, echoing no doubt the Prague Spring of 1968, provoked the Wisconsin Spring and the occupation of the state capitol in Madison. These spring uprisings were followed by the long hot English summer of rioting in London, the tent city encampment on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, the violent suppression of uprisings in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain, and an externally supported civil war in Libya. Occupy Wall Street, launched on 17 September 2011, constituted an “American Autumn” as protests spread from Zuccotti Park to scores of cities all over the US.

The point of view of these essays might be described as hybrid, linking a sense of solidarity with the spirit of Occupy to the critical perspectives provided by well-established disciplines and professions—ethnography, law and political science, art history, and media studies. At the same time we profess a more or less “disobedient” relation to the protocols of our disciplines. Taussig violates the supposedly scientific division between participant and observer fundamental to anthropology. Harcourt’s work as an adviser and advocate for his students in Occupy Chicago complicates his role as a critical commentator who refuses to speak for or to Occupy in any representative capacity. My iconological approach requires a constant shuttling across the standard boundaries between art and mass culture, aesthetics and politics, witnessing and bearing witness. Situated at the border between commitment and critical analysis, these essays were all written with a strong sense of the authors’ limitations. None of us is qualified to speak with authority about the Middle East. Taken as a trio of well-established, white, male American scholars, we cannot claim to represent the diversity that constitutes the Occupy movement in the US, much less globally. All of us would subscribe to Taussig’s sense of humility in the face

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of Friedrich Nietzsche's impossible demand "that a historian has to create a text equal to what he or she is writing about."<sup>1</sup> All of us would confess to Harcourt's sense that "our language never caught up with this political phenomenon"<sup>2</sup> we are describing, while at the same time insisting with Taussig that "description and analysis of an event is a culture-creating activity."<sup>3</sup> The authors might be called, as Harcourt suggests, "fellow travellers" who are skeptical that any ready-made "'communist hypothesis'" is adequate to the Occupy movement ("P," pp. 34, 55). At best, these essays hope to provide one more modest beginning, in Edward Said's sense of the word,<sup>4</sup> in the understanding of the momentous events that shook the world in 2011.

Indeed, the very notion of the event comes under scrutiny in these pages, which explore other ways of conceptualizing revolutionary processes. Would it be better, for instance, to think of this as a revolutionary *moment*, with all the associated ambiguities of the merely momentary and ephemeral alongside the sense of the *momentous* turning point, the moment of force that torques historical events and makes tiny occurrences (a fruit vendor's self-immolation in Tunisia) into a global incident and a catalyst for revolution? Would it be better to think of revolutions, not as specifically definable events, but as subtle shifts in language, imagery, and the limits of the thinkable? Could it be that 2011 is what Barack Obama has called a teachable moment, one in which the president of the United States, as sovereign pedagogue, learned from the Occupy movement how to speak a new, more emphatic language?

How can one bring into focus both the multiplicity and the unity of this remarkable year? What narrative would be adequate to it? Of course many narratives have already been tried out, and the op-ed pages and blogosphere have churned out millions of words to explain it. Each of these sites and actions is distinct: Tangier is not Cairo is not Damascus is not Tripoli is not Madison is not Wall Street is not Walla Walla, Washington. Each has its own particular history and circumstances. And yet we know that something links these places and the events that transpired in them. In the nineteenth century one would have called it the spirit of revolution and understood it as a kind of ghostly, uncanny return of familiar images of popular uprisings and masses, among these the specter that was haunting Europe when Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels penned the *Communist*

1. Michael Taussig, "I Am so Angry I Made a Sign," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Fall 2012): 56.

2. Bernard E. Harcourt, "'Political Disobedience,'" *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Fall 2012): 44; hereafter abbreviated "P."

3. Taussig, "I Am so Angry I Made a Sign," p. 56.

4. See Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975; New York, 1985).

*Manifesto* in 1848. In our time, the preferred language is biological and biopolitical, employing terms like contagion to describe images and words that have gone viral in the global media.

We also know that the spirit of the revolutions of the nineteenth century was carried by very concrete and material forms of mediation, from the unlicensed printing of pamphlets to the brand new postal systems that made it possible for revolutionary corresponding societies to exploit the mass communications and social media networks of their day. Twitter, Facebook, text messaging, email, and digital imaging provide the technical basis and open new media spaces for political assembly and contestation. A virtual and highly mediated “space of appearance” (to use Hannah Arendt’s term) sprang up alongside new forms of *immediacy* in real places and times of face-to-face encounter;<sup>5</sup> the mic check and drum circles of Zuccotti Park, the dancers, banners, and posters of Tahrir Square, the mass encampments with their dispensaries of medicine, food, clothing, books, their working groups and general assemblies.

The Occupy movement presented, in short, a rebirth of the political (and the social), as such. The heart of Occupy, whether in Tahrir Square or Zuccotti Park, was not quite politics and certainly not politics as usual, but a reopening of what Arendt called

the space of appearance [that] comes into being wherever men [and women] are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm. . . . Unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men . . . but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves.<sup>6</sup>

The refusal of Occupy to designate leaders or representative spokespersons, its insistence on anonymity and equality, and its reluctance to issue a specific list of demands or policy recommendations, were an effort to prolong this moment of rebirth and renewal of the political. It managed to dilate the period of what Arendt called “natality,” the fact

that men [and women] are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners, that the very capacity for beginning is

5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958; New York, 1959), p. 178.

6. *Ibid.*

rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth.<sup>7</sup>

That is why a wedding was celebrated and a baby was born in Tahrir Square.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the usual rituals of demonstration, which are by definition limited to a specific time and place, *occupation* is a form of expressive conduct that states a determination to remain and to dwell in the public space indefinitely. It was not that the occupiers needed a place to sleep but that they were saying something by doing something, a neat reversal of speech-act theory, which focuses on saying as doing in performative utterances. When pundits and commentators insisted that Occupy state its demands, then, they missed the most important statement that was being made by the movement, the same statement that was made during the American civil rights era: “we shall not be moved.” We are here and are determined to dwell in this place as long as it takes.

As long as it takes to do what? Of course numerous demands were issued, ranging from the removal of authoritarian governments in the Middle East to the transformation of political economies and the end of corruption in the US and Europe. But an even more immediate performative goal was to make visible the massive and violent overreaction of the state to these rebirths of primitive democracy. Arendt notes the fragility of the space of appearance, the “disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves.” And it was these moments of disappearance, eviction, dispersal, and arrest, often accompanied by excessive force and tactics of media censorship, that rendered hypervisible the response of threatened governmental authorities. The spectacles of violence—from the hired thugs who laid siege to Tahrir Square, to the massacres perpetrated on the Syrian people, to the clubbing, pepper-spraying, tear-gassing, and shooting of nonviolent protestors across the US—were also an essential part of the performative utterances of Occupy. Mayor Rahm Emanuel of Chicago, as Harcourt shows, rammed through legislation authorizing him to

marshal and deputize—I am exaggerating—the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the United States Department of Justice’s Bureau of Alco-

7. Arendt, *On Revolution* (1963; New York, 2006).

8. “It’s not just revolutions that see the light of day in Egypt’s squares. Tahrir News reports that a protester gave birth today in Tahrir Square. She was rushed to an ambulance where she delivered her baby” (“Massive Number of Egyptians Take to Streets on Jan. 25 Revolution Anniversary,” *Ahram Online*, 25 Jan. 2012, [english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/114/32651/Egypt/-January-Revolution-continues/Massive-number-of-Egyptians-take-to-streets-on--Ja.aspx](http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/114/32651/Egypt/-January-Revolution-continues/Massive-number-of-Egyptians-take-to-streets-on--Ja.aspx)).

hol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), and the entire United States Department of Justice (DOJ) – as well as state police (the Illinois Department of State Police and the Illinois Attorney General), county law enforcement (State’s Attorney of Cook County), and any “other law enforcement agencies determined by the superintendent of police to be necessary for the fulfillment of law enforcement functions. [“P,” p. 50]

Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City similarly played his part, mobilizing the New York Police Department, which he seems to regard as his personal army, to rout Occupy Wall Street from Zuccotti Park in the middle of the night, while forcibly preventing journalists and cameras from recording the tactics of the police.<sup>9</sup>

These efforts to abort the birth of new spaces of democracy, while trampling all over the First Amendment “right of the people peaceably to assemble” were also statements of a clear message to potential occupiers: spaces of actually existing democratic equality are a danger to the political status quo and will not be tolerated. In this sense, US mayors from New York to Oakland to Chicago managed to replay the role that Martin Luther King, Jr. assigned to Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. The spectacle of police brutality, including the effort to cover up that spectacle, paradoxically had the effect of amplifying the message of Occupy, making its statements about the actual conditions of political and economic corruption even more emphatic and irrefutable.

What is next for Occupy? We are not prepared to make predictions. What does seem clear is that the movements of 2011 have changed the world in some fundamental ways. As revolutions, the events are so heterogeneous as to defy generalization. Some are driven to violence by the intransigence and brutality of established authority; most are nonviolent and aim, not at regime change, but at a systematic overhaul of capitalism and its relation to democracy. Everyone agrees that Occupy Wall Street changed the conversation in the mass media from deficit reduction to economic inequality and joblessness. It may be that some of the revolutions have already done what they could, while others are in the process of being betrayed or suppressed. Meanwhile, something has been born, or reborn, in occupied spaces from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park, and we now must wait to see if it will be strangled in its cradle. We know one thing for certain: the meaning of the word and image of Occupy has been irrevocably changed. A transitive verb that can take an indefinite range of

9. See Alex Pareene, “Mayor Bloomberg’s Army,” *Salon*, 1 Dec. 2011, [www.salon.com/2011/12/01/mayor\\_bloombergs\\_army/](http://www.salon.com/2011/12/01/mayor_bloombergs_army/)

objects has now become a noun and an adjective and an iconic brand name, performing as the subject as well as the predicate of expressive conduct and action-as-speech. Occupy has also reversed the meaning of the notorious contemporary image of the camp, exemplified by the detention center; the tent city, for so long the emblem of refugees and displaced persons, has been transformed into a site of gathering resistance. Occupations of large civilian populations and territories by military administrations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel-Palestine now must face their positive counterparts in the form of democratic occupations that promise to bring something new into the world.