

# Occupy London in international and local context

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Occupy London came late to the international wave of contention that in 2011 sprang up in countries as diverse as Egypt, Spain, Greece, and the US. Although this ‘International of grievance’ might be represented as a transnational reaction to the severe financial crisis that unfolded from 2008, each local instance of protest had characteristics peculiar to it. The difficulty for the scholar of social movements is to understand that wave of contention as a phenomenon with core characteristics and common narratives, without underestimating the special elements of particular cases. In this chapter, we consider Occupy London, which, though it identified itself as the British ‘strand’ in an international cycle of struggles, bore the burdens and limitations of the social reality and historical specificities that were its local context.

We consider Occupy London as a phenomenon stimulated by three different factors: a ‘passing of the baton’ from other similar mobilizations around the world (especially Occupy Wall Street); a reaction to the ways in which the crisis has been experienced in Britain; and a link in the long chain of direct action protests in Britain. We then proceed to observe Occupy London more closely. What kinds of people participated and why? What were the internal characteristics of the protest and how did they influence its outcome? Was it an anti-capitalist protest, as the media portrayed it? Might it be better understood as a social movement, a political mobilization or as something else? To answer these questions, we will draw upon data derived from direct observation of Occupy London, more than 30 interviews with participants, and survey data, as well as secondary data and literature on the 2011 struggles and Occupy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Observations were made at the at St Paul’s camp on several days over several months, chiefly by Sotirakopoulos, but also by Rootes and others. The interviews employed here were conducted by Sotirakopoulos, and the survey data was collected on 9 and 12 November 2011 at St Paul’s and Finsbury Square, as part of the international project, “Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualising Contestation” (CCC), by a research team from the University of Southampton, led by Clare Saunders, using a questionnaire adapted from the common research instrument of the CCC project by members of the UK partners in the CCC project (led by Saunders at Southampton and Rootes at the University of Kent). The CCC project was conducted under the auspices of the European Science Foundation as an ECRP collaboration led by the University of Antwerp; UK participation was funded by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant number RES-062-23-1565.

## The general frame: an international wave of contention

Economic crisis is widely supposed to entail social dislocation and political contention. Just as the economic turmoil associated since 2008 with the global financial crisis has been international, as one would expect in a globalized financial environment, so the contention that has followed the crisis has also been international. Nevertheless, the recent wave of contention can be also understood as a climax in struggles that had been going on for almost a decade, as a symptom not only of the crisis of capitalism, but also of the side effects of the cycle of accumulation commonly labelled “neoliberalism”.

This contention has taken various forms, but the type of discontent on which we focus is grassroots protests of complaint against or direct challenge to the state. These varied significantly in size, orientation and character. The protests of the Arab Spring and Cairo’s Tahrir Square, the Indignados movement in Spain, the Outraged of Syntagma Square in Athens, and the Occupy movement in its various versions in some cases leaned towards violence, even riot, usually, as in Egypt and Greece, as a reaction to state repression. Because of the urgency of the conjunctures they faced, only rarely did they attempt to articulate a systematic political narrative. In the case of Occupy, unable to formulate a political alternative, the protests had a prefigurative and moralistic character.

From 2011 onwards, the internationalization and diffusion of protest conformed to the classic model proposed by Kriesi et al. (1995, p. 182): issues shared on a wide international level – in this case the financial crisis and the malfunctioning or lack of democracy – triggering mobilizations that then gain momentum and influence one another. Such “eventful protest” (della Porta 2008) produces its own dynamic that not only gives birth to new forms of organization, narratives, and repertoires of action, but also challenges and transforms the existing dominant structures. At the risk of exaggerating and oversimplifying, one might say that in 2011 it was not movements that gave rise to protests but, on the contrary, protests sprang up as a reaction to social, economic and political malaise, gained a momentum of their own, and gave birth to movements.

Applying McAdam and Rucht’s work on diffusion, we might identify the Arab Spring in general and Tahrir Square in particular as the “transmitter” (1993, p. 59), the event that inspired the subsequent wave of contention, its repertoire of action, themes, values and cultural symbols (Cf. Kriesi et al., 1995, p. 182).

The ‘trademark’ of the recent wave of contention was the physical occupation of space, usually a square. Square occupations spread like a ‘meme’ (Mason 2012, pp. 150-151). “Time and again, the impulse to create areas of self-control ... led... to an almost mystical determination by protesters to occupy a symbolic physical space and create

within it an experimental, shared community” (idem, p. 84). A heterogeneous multitude consisting of people from different classes, social backgrounds and political beliefs, meets in the physical space of a square, encounters that would be difficult in more traditional forms of organization and solidarity building, such as the political party or the trade union.

The occupation of the squares fulfilled the criteria that Soule (2007, pp. 302, 303) identified as necessary for successful diffusion of a protest event: it gave advantages to the movement; it was compatible with already existing experiences in the milieu (as were the horizontalist elements from the global justice movement); it was simple and came with limited risks (the occupation of a square is easier than taking over a major government building, let alone the state); it did not demand strict commitment (as, for example, does participation in a political party); and it promised to deliver results. This last element is important because a successful outcome in one instance – such as the overthrow of Mubarak – makes diffusion easier (Koopmans, 2007, p. 26).

If Tahrir Square was the ‘transmitter’, then the most direct ‘adopters’ were the Spanish Indignados, the Greek Outraged and Occupy. This was mirrored in the words of the participants of the London Occupy protest, who almost unanimously identified the Arab Spring as the initial inspiration for their action. But if this was diffusion, it was what Tarrow would call non-relational diffusion (2005, p. 104), diffusion through mostly indirect channels such as the media (and mainly social media), rather than direct contacts between activists, as was the case in previous cycles of struggle (McAdam and Rucht, 1993).

The common themes – a demand for equality and democracy – that can be traced in the recent wave of contention are key to understanding the phenomenon (Tejerina et al., 2013). Yet these themes are so vague and devoid of specific content that they risk being an empty form (Rocamadur, 2013). There was no specific political platform or programme to unify the heterogeneous masses that filled the squares, beyond some negative consensus in cases like Egypt (against Mubarak) and Greece (against the austerity packages). Equality and democracy were principles to which no one could easily object. Yet it remains unclear what exactly equality meant. In what form, for whom and in what terms: economic, legislative, social? Who would deliver this equality? Likewise, ‘democracy’ took different forms and meanings, from ‘true democracy’ in Spain to ‘direct democracy’ in Athens, with the analogous difference in the scope and radicalism of each concept (Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos, 2013, p. 446). In both cases, however, democracy sounds more like a hopeless gesture and a call to an unknown recipient, or one unwilling to listen, as the ruling elites in times of crisis have proven to be. Thus it appeared more as a demand for a return to a *status quo ante* than a move towards something new. Similarly, Occupy Wall Street raised demands for reductions in gross social and economic inequality and for democracy, but developed no

political project (Rowe, 2011; Zizek, 2012). As Castells (2012, p. 186) put it, Occupy 'presented more grievances than demands'.

### The short winter of Occupy London

Occupy London was a paradoxical protest. It was relatively small and quite moderate in its scope and ambition, and after months of protest, it had clearly failed to live up to the extravagant expectations it had excited. Yet Occupy London attracted an unusual level of media attention and it captured the imagination of legions of sympathisers. The fact that it made such an impact and had such resonance with public opinion signals the importance of understanding a phenomenon that has so far remained under-analysed.

Because it was preceded by Occupy Wall Street and the occupations of the squares in Cairo, Madrid and Athens, but also because the London protests of the previous winter had been surprisingly subdued, Occupy London was a protest event that was widely anticipated. Thus, when it kicked off, at least among the radical milieu, it was considered a natural reaction to the crisis. "I was watching Occupy Wall Street and was thinking how great it was that it was spreading globally and I was desperate for it to come to UK so I could get involved here", said Obi, an activist from St Paul's camp information team (interview 1). In the previous year, student protests and occupations against the rise in university tuition fees, actions by the UK Uncut network against corporations that allegedly failed to pay their due share of taxes, and the massive march organised by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in London on 26 March 2011, together with the riots of August 2011, had raised expectations of a 'winter of discontent', something anticipated not only by activists, but also by the police (Rootes, fieldwork notes). In the event, the winter of 2011-12 brought little more than three months of peaceful and relatively small-scale occupation of two squares and one deserted building in / around the City of London.

It would, however, have been unreasonable to expect a great deal of Occupy London in view of the fact that it was obliged to pick up from the point where other mobilisations had failed. Thus, after the student protests and UK-Uncut faced decisive repressive policing in the winter of 2010-2011, their activists had little option but to retreat from direct action, or to come up with new repertoires<sup>2</sup>. The TUC, although it managed to gather a huge crowd on 26 March 2011, failed to keep up the momentum, especially when attention was diverted to violent incidents and small-scale rioting away from the main event. In addition, the vigorous prosecution of rioters and looters after the turbulent days of August made clear that the government had and was prepared to

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, however, the horizontal organizational structures of the student occupations of 2010-11 and the alter-globalization movement, and the narrative of UK Uncut's framing of banks and big corporations as enjoying unfair tax and other benefits, were carried over to Occupy London.

use all the resources necessary to control the situation, as well as overwhelming public support for the enforcement of law and order. There was a need for something new and different in direct action and the radical milieu in general.

Although much inspiration was drawn from the Arab Spring and the Indignados movement, the most direct catalyst for Occupy London was Occupy Wall Street (OWS), which inspired the rapid, global spread of Occupy protests. Clearly, the narratives, forms of action and general outlook of OWS were closer to the direct experience of British activists than were lethal protests for the overthrow of a dictator in Cairo or the violent clashes and Molotov cocktails of the anti-austerity struggles in Athens. On the other hand, Occupy's power rested on the fact that it captured the imagination and spread as a 'meme', and this might explain why such a protest sprang up in London only in October and not earlier, in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring or concurrently with the Spanish and Greek Indignados.

OWS had been active for almost a month when a call was circulated via electronic media for a similar gathering outside the London Stock Exchange on Saturday 15 October 2011, the international day of protest called by the Spanish Indignados. However, when protesters attempted to occupy privately-owned Paternoster Square, which faces the London Stock Exchange, the police sealed it off in order to enforce a High Court injunction obtained by the square's owners. A crowd of some 2,000 to 3,000 people then gathered in the neighbouring unfenced paved area, part public and part the property of the Church, in front of and to the west of St Paul's Cathedral. On the pretext of protecting the cathedral, the police briefly 'kettled' (contained) the protesters. However, though police prevented entry to Paternoster Square, after the Canon Chancellor of St Paul's intervened to ask them not to impede peaceful protest, the police announced that they would not act to clear protesters from the area immediately adjacent to the cathedral. Numbers diminished as night fell, but some 70 tents were pitched on the flagstones and about 500 protesters remained, with the police overlooking them from the cathedral threshold.

Interviews suggest that few of the protesters who camped outside St Paul's had done so with any intention of staying there for long. "I was here, like many on 15 October, just to see what's happening and then go home. But police starting kettling us, so I decided, 'OK, I'll stay'. Next day I got my sleeping bag and I've been staying here ever since" (Obi, interview 1). Soon there were more than 100 tents and several hundred protesters living on the site, their numbers diminishing at night and peaking at weekends. A media tent and a camp kitchen were quickly set up. A second camp was established 1,500 metres away in Finsbury Square, and in November activists occupied a nearby empty building, owned by UBS bank, which became known as the 'Bank of Ideas'. Although the 'Bank of Ideas' was evicted in late January, the camp at St Paul's survived until 28 February, and the Finsbury Square camp until June 2012, but the protest was practically dead long before the last tents were removed from St Paul's.

Everyday life in Occupy London camps was precarious and uncomfortable but the discomforts were often mitigated. Lack of running water and sanitation was an issue, with the solution usually found in the toilets of nearby malls or cafes, but portable chemical toilets were soon installed at the edge of the site. Housekeeping duties were divided according to a rota. Groceries were freely available thanks to apparently generous donations provided by various individuals, groups and even the Church. A 'Tent City University' was established, where ideas were exchanged, discussions were held and scholars and activists gave lectures. Many workshops took place in the 'Bank of Ideas', which also provided shelter from the London winter (Sotirakopoulos, fieldwork notes).

Occupy London was non-hierarchical, with horizontal (non) structures and precautions to avoid any possible institutionalization, a tendency a prominent activist referred to as "institutional panic" (Boni, interview 2). Decisions were taken by a general assembly, by consensus and, in the manner of previous protest camps, open discussion facilitated by hand gestures. There were various thematic working groups that introduced issues for discussion in the general assembly, and a tranquillity team to prevent tensions and ensure that the 'safe space' policy was observed.

Soon, besides housekeeping issues, Occupy London had to spend much time managing its legal disputes with the authorities of St Paul's Cathedral and the City of London. In late October, amidst claims, highly publicised in the press, that the Cathedral was losing revenue because visitors were deterred by the proximity of protesters, the Cathedral authorities closed St Paul's on grounds of health and safety. It was widely expected that the police would soon be called to clear the square. As a reaction to such plans and as a gesture of solidarity with the protesters, the Canon Chancellor of St Paul's, Giles Fraser, resigned his post (Butt, Laville & Malik, 2011). The backlash against the proposed eviction of the square led to the resignation of the Dean of St Paul's, Graeme Knowles, some days later (Walker, 2011). From November onwards, the relationship of Occupy London with the Church was more harmonious, with activists knowing that they could stay at least until New Year's Day.

These controversies with the Church were widely covered by the media and so kept Occupy in the news. Much of Occupy's 'success' in getting attention from the media and the wider public was thus due to the accident that protesters prevented from camping outside London Stock Exchange ended up outside St Paul's. On the one hand, they were on the doorstep of one of London's main tourist attractions, and on the other their interaction with the Church gave a whole new dynamic to the protest. "We are in the middle", Tami said. "On the left hand side you have the financial area. On the right side you have the religious side, which is interlinked with the financial powers...and they shouldn't be. On the board of trustees of St Paul's cathedral you've got Goldman Sachs and HSBC. The fact that we stand between these sides highlights a lot of things" (interview 19). This proximity to St Paul's enhanced religious and spiritual tendencies within the protest camp. Slogans such as 'what would Jesus do?' or 'Jesus would be with

us' became popular, and a man dressed as Jesus Christ and holding a banner claiming 'I threw out the moneylenders for a reason' became a media spectacle.

The final blow to Occupy came when the Corporation of the City of London won a High Court order for the eviction of the camp from the public space adjoining the cathedral. The remaining campers refused to leave, and so the eviction was forcible, though with little actual violence (BBC News, 2012). The High Court injunction was not, however, the only factor that brought Occupy London to its knees. The rigours of a protest camp during winter, natural fatigue and the exhaustion of initiatives were also factors. After Christmas, fewer and fewer activists were staying at the camps. One activist, Fuzzy, described general assemblies in Finsbury Square in the first months of 2012 that attracted only eight people (interview 3). Homeless people became a larger proportion of the camp's inhabitants. Brendan O'Neill (2012) reported in February that "Occupy London is now effectively a holding camp for the mentally ill, a space where the psychologically afflicted and deeply troubled can gather to eat, drink and be un-merry". Fuzzy admits that the camps at some point did indeed look like a "welfare shelter", although he considered this to be a success of Occupy, as it provided an alternative to inadequate welfare institutions (interview 3).

Even a sympathetic commentator, Laurie Penny (2012), reported in January that "the protest has become a network of mutual support for the lost and destitute (...) Three months of sleeping in tents, washing in the bathrooms of nearby cafes and working around-the-clock to run a kitchen feeding thousands with no running water and little electricity will transform even the most fresh-faced student into a jittering bundle of aching limbs and paranoia". Penny touches here on one of the factors that doomed Occupy London to remain a small protest – the heavy demands it made on its activists. However, this is only part of the picture. After all, camping in Zuccotti Park in New York was also uncomfortable, yet OWS attracted larger numbers, whilst in other cases in the recent wave of contention, such as in Cairo and Athens, lives were put on the line or police repression was greater. Thus the relative modesty of the London protest cannot convincingly be explained in terms of the discomforts and rigours of the protest itself, which were in most respects considerably less exacting than those experienced by protesters in other places.

One deeper reason for the small numbers of participants in Occupy London was the relatively mild character of the social and economic crisis that followed the financial crisis in Britain. Although the weakest parts of British society suffered increasing hardships, the social structure remained intact and for the great majority of people life had not altered dramatically. Although the rate of unemployment rose from 5% in 2007 to 8% in 2011, this was modest compared with the escalation of unemployment in Greece, for example, where it rose from 8% in 2007 to 18% in 2011, and was accompanied by severe social dislocation. In addition, as we will see shortly, the apolitical or anti-political and sometimes naive narrative of Occupy London probably

alienated a critical mass of more conventionally politically interested people who might otherwise have been keener to participate in an anti-austerity movement.

However, Occupy London presents us with another paradox: despite its small size, it survived for several months, longer than its New York exemplar. This was partly because Occupy London managed to stay in the public eye for quite a long time, whether because of its interaction with the Church, the support it attracted from sympathisers, or its disputes with the City of London. This attention fuelled Occupy, insulated it from repressive policing, and gave it a *raison d'être* when politically it seemed to be at a dead-end. Prominent activist Boni observed that, with protests like Occupy, sometimes it is difficult to call it a day: “Yes, at some point we became something like a refugee camp, as most of the people with some politics had already gone home. But you could not easily end it. Some people will always stay on” (interview 2).

Occupy London's predicament makes evident the limitations of self-sustained protest camps. Even if a protest overcomes litigation or harassment by the police (which were among the factors that brought OWS to an end), the uncomfortable reality of everyday life in a protest camp will severely narrow its appeal and limit its duration. The idea of an enduring protest camp in the heart of the city, not merely protesting a single issue but calling for a wider change, appeared as a radical innovation in activists' repertoire of action, but its significance was probably overestimated.

### Who participated and why

In phenomena like Occupy, which lack a central political line or orientation, the protests *are* the people who participate in them. Accordingly, information about the social characteristics of the protesters is of particular interest. This section will be mostly based on our fieldwork observations and extracts from interviews, backed up by some quantitative data from the 'Caught in the Act of Protest' survey. From the open-ended interviews, it became clear that the backgrounds of activists are closely related to the bases of their decisions to participate in the protest; therefore 'who participated' and 'why' will be examined together.

It might be assumed that the majority of participants in such a protest would be young people and students. However, in the case of Occupy London, there seemed to be a balance of age groups. Unsurprisingly, most 'full-time' participants, especially in the mornings, were unemployed, freelancers or students. In at least two cases, people gave up jobs or even houses to participate in Occupy; they were, predictably, young and without family commitments.

Occupy protesters were reluctant to define themselves politically. From the open-ended interviews, the majority of activists who answered the question about



political affiliation declared some kind of link with the environmental movement, whereas some activists, reluctantly, identified themselves with some sort of socialism, and three declared themselves to be anarchists. Of the 106 activists and sympathisers who responded to the 'Caught in the act of Protest' survey and declared a present party identification, 47 identified with the Greens, 33 with Labour, 8 with the Liberal Democrats, 4 with the Conservative Party, 4 with the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) and 1 'Communist'.

On peoples' motivations in taking the squares, the dominating theme was a sense of injustice and inequality triggering a feeling of personal responsibility. "The system we live in is fundamentally broken, socially, fiscally and economically. The social contract is broken. We want to show the displeasure of people against the system" (Buenaventura, interview 4). For Adrian, it was a sense of duty to future generations: "Something is seriously wrong with our society. I have children and I feel I have a responsibility for their future" (interview 5). The crisis and its consequences operated as a catalyst for some protesters to take action: "I lost my job and I cannot find another job, and this is why I decided to come here to protest" (John, interview 6). Matthew was quite candid: "I have a mortgage, VAT has increased and the cost of food has gone up. Had I not been touched by the crisis, I probably wouldn't care for this movement and I would tell them to go get a job" (interview 7). Predictably, others had different motives for participating. "I was simply interested to join a free and open community" (Nathan, interview 8). A feeling of sharing and of contributing motivated Carmel: "I cook well, so I came to provide food to people who are here, together with love, smiles and appreciation" (interview 9). Others, such as the wanderer and self-declared "old hippy", Poet, had more practical concerns: "I have to stay somewhere overnight. The meditation tent seems just right!" (interview 10).

Most, however, saw participation in Occupy as a gesture of personal protest against what was perceived to be a general injustice. "I feel strongly against inequality and I'd feel a hypocrite if I hadn't got involved in this" (Spiter interview 11). The vague calls for equality and democracy that were the general themes of this wave of contention internationally were, in Occupy London, linked with a strong message of emotional dissatisfaction and moral disapproval. The words of a prominent activist at St Paul's (interview 1) – "we are showing them we are unhappy" – were repeated time and again. This tendency is not new in social movements and contentious politics. What is new is that the expression of this dissatisfaction at St Paul's (and at most protest sites internationally) was not followed by a collective demand for a specific, systematic political programme designed to put an end to the situation against which the protest arose.

Why did the protesters adopt one repertoire of action rather than another? Why did the protest take the particular form of occupying a square? Almost every interviewee mentioned Tahrir Square, the Spanish Indignados or OWS as sources of inspiration. Activists 'renamed' the square outside St Paul's, erecting a sign proclaiming

“Tahrir Square EC4M, City of Westminster”, and there were banners used in other countries, including one from Syntagma in Athens. At least three long-term participants of Occupy London had previous experience in Spain and Greece. Toby, a Spanish activist, who sold his car so that he could travel to Occupy London, explicitly mentioned his experience in Puerta del Sol (interview 12). Internationalism was one of the values Occupy activists emphasised. Links with other Occupy camps throughout the world were promoted as core elements of the London ‘branch’, which also adopted the narrative of representing the 99% against the power of the 1%, the common theme of the global Occupy movement (Tejerina et al., 2013, p. 384).

Thus Occupy London adopted (and adapted) some of the forms, codes and repertoires of actions employed elsewhere in the 2011 international wave of contention, but it also sprang up as a reaction to a growing feeling of injustice and inequality, accelerated by the conjunctural crisis in Britain. But Occupy London was also a link in the chain of grassroots protests in Britain. A number of tents and banners bore visible signs that they had been used in previous years at the Camps for Climate Action. Not only did the climate camps inspire because they had been innovative, peaceful and inclusive (Saunders and Price 2009, Saunders 2012), but they had also been successful in problematizing the burning of coal to generate electricity, and the expansion of aviation. However, although the Climate Camps were a space within which more conventional forms of political action were canvassed, their prevailing ethos and strategy was a ‘post-political’ one that viewed individual responsibility as the primary basis for action (Schlembach et al. 2012). It is probably not coincidental that Occupy emerged just as the Camp for Climate Action dissolved in order that activists might engage in the wider society and channel more energy into highlighting the miseries caused by the financial crisis (Camp for Climate Action, 2011).

Daniel, an activist with experience from climate camps and the global justice movement, said: “My experience in the climate camps made me think I’d be of some help to this movement” (interview 13). On the continuity of direct action protest in the UK, he commented that “this form of protest goes back to the anti-roads movement. When you occupy, you reclaim a space for yourself and you prevent others from using it. This concept has grown bigger and bigger...from squatting rooms to the climate camps. Occupy is an incarnation of that concept, but has left behind the idea of preventing other people from using this space”. But what about other, more recent movements? “The alter-globalization movement created a space within activism for people doing things in the streets and for its norms and values to become the accepted way of doing protest – consensus in decision-making and occupying a physical space. This is like a second generation thing. There is some continuation, but without necessarily much connection”.

Boni, a key activist in Occupy, accepted the importance of some climate camp veterans, but added that “we have to keep in mind that most people in Occupy London did not have any history in protest. There were people from all walks of life...even a

Conservative Party councillor was there – and of course soon left” (interview 2). According to an activist in his late 40s, and with long experience in direct action, “the roots of Occupy lay not only in climate camps, but go further in the past, to the peace camps, the anti-roads movement etc (...) Movements come full circle or reach their limits. But then they re-emerge in different conditions and with different characteristics” (interview14).

Another key activist, Fuzzy, was much younger. His protest history, like that of many others in Occupy, began in the student mobilizations of 2010 and the anti-cuts campaign. Yet, he saw himself as part of the rich history of direct action protest in Britain. To the suggestion that previous direct action protests with characteristics similar to those of Occupy had disappeared, and asked whether the same would happen with Occupy, he replied that “it’s like waves. When you are wrapped up in a wave, it’s impossible to know whether it’s high tide or low tide and whether or not this particular wave or this particular tide will be the one that pushes everything over the edge. But what you can always rely on is that there will be a next wave” (interview 3).

Thus Occupy London was at the same time a part of a transnational wave of contention, a reaction to the financial crisis as it was experienced in Britain, and an event expressing some continuity with previous grassroots mobilizations in Britain.

### Squares devoid of politics?

It is now time to examine Occupy’s narrative and pose some questions about its character. Was it, as it was portrayed by the media, at least its early stages, an anti-capitalist protest? Should it be understood as a political movement? Or was it perhaps the collective staging of a gesture at the level of consciousness and mainly a prefigurative protest? Deciphering the ideological character of Occupy’s narrative is not easy because its activists celebrated diversity and were unwilling to accept a political identity. For this reason, Occupy’s ‘official’ documents serve as a starting point.

According to the ‘constitutional’ statement on its website, “Occupy London is part of the global social movement that has brought together concerned citizens from across the world against this injustice and to fight for a sustainable economy that puts people and the environment we live in before corporate profits” (Occupy London, n.d. [2011]). Thus big corporations are foregrounded as opponents, their pursuit of profit portrayed as responsible for the aforementioned injustice. The reference to a ‘sustainable economy’ and the ‘environment’ reveals the Green credentials of Occupy London and hints towards economic growth as something problematic. Reference to “concerned citizens” reveals how much of Occupy’s narrative was about the perceived ‘apathy of the masses’. The initial statement of Occupy’s assembly targets the ‘unsustainable system’, celebrates diversity and inclusiveness, opposes the cuts,

declares solidarity with the oppressed around the world, and denounces the environmental degradation caused by the present economic system (Occupy London, 2011a). Here, the vague and all-encompassing nature of Occupy becomes evident. It is a narrative that could be incorporated by almost anyone, from political elites to the Green movement.

According to Rochon, the elements that give “newsworthiness” to a movement are size, novelty and militancy (1990, p. 108). Occupy London was small and there was nothing militant about it. Even its novelty was limited because a sustained protest camp in the heart of London was not unprecedented; a ‘Democracy Village’ protest camp occupied Parliament Square for almost three months in May-July 2010 before it was forcibly evicted.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore necessary to search elsewhere for the bases of Occupy’s appeal. Gitlin (2012) points out how, in times of crisis when many members of the public are worried and crave some sort of reaction, a movement that offers a vague and open-ended narrative can be quite easily accepted by a wide range of people. Another reason for Occupy’s noteworthiness is based not in what Occupy was saying, but in how the protest was perceived by the media. For O’Neill, Occupy London’s all-encompassing message made it possible for other subjects, and mainly the media, to project onto it their own worries and agendas. Yet Occupy’s promotion by the media was unusual for such a small protest (O’Neill, 2011). Prominent Occupy activist Naomi Calvin (2011) was “extremely pleased by the coverage we’ve got from the mainstream media. Some of the people in the media team are from UK Uncut and they’ve been staggered by the amount of attention we’ve had”.

Interviews did not greatly help to elucidate Occupy’s ideological outlook. “I am a socialist, but we don’t want any of these old words” (Chloe interview 15). “That’s the beauty of this protest, that you don’t have a group of people with a certain agenda. We have the Marxists, anti-capitalists, student unions, environmental protesters...all sorts of people coming together for a common cause” (Charlie interview 16). Dan seemed unhappy even to address the question: “It is an inclusive movement, we don’t ask people for qualifications or beliefs” (interview 17). For Peter, “everyone comes here as an individual. There are members of different organizations, such as environmental, feminist, anti-cuts...but they are coming here as individuals. People don’t want organizations and groups to be here” (interview 18). “Occupy is my ideology; I want no other labels” (Tami interview 19). “We are looking forward beyond separatist ideologies. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Phil interview 20). Bill summed up the argument: “Ideology? Meh...” (interview 21).

Their diversity of views and unwillingness to accept an ideological orientation was celebrated by Occupy as a virtue, but it attracted criticism. For Frank Furedi (2011), the activists were celebrating their inability to say anything practical and particular at

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<sup>3</sup> A peace camp on the pavement at Parliament Square, started by Brian Haw to protest against Britain’s participation in the invasion of Iraq, has existed continuously since 2001, but it never involved more than a handful of campers. The ‘Democracy Village’ numbered about 30 tents.

all. Even if Occupy's narrative was, on a rhetorical level, all-encompassing and ambitious, the set of demands that was articulated was quite modest and limited to a reform ensuring transparency in transactions in the City of London and the personal liability of high players in the financial sector (Occupy, 2011b). As far as the participants interviewed were concerned, two themes emerged as targets for the movement: the shifting of the public agenda on issues of economic and social inequality, and the sustaining of the protest for as long as possible. Natalia from the media-team emphasised this agenda-setting element: "Debate in the media and the rhetoric of politicians was on a status quo track, but now this is gradually changing. It's not a massive shift, but it's a shift. In that sense we have achieved something already" (interview 22). For Obi from St. Paul's Information Team, "the important thing is that already after some weeks of the protest, people know more about the City of London and how powerful the Mayor has become. We know more about capitalism... finally politicians and archbishop talk about equality and justice" (interview 1). On the self-sustaining character of the protest, "The mere fact that we stand here is a success" (Toby interview 12) was a motto echoed time and again in Occupy camps. However, although Occupy may have stimulated a debate, it is doubtful whether the terms of the debate about issues of social and economic inequality shifted as a result. Celebrating the mere existence of Occupy risks seeing the campaign as an end in itself.

### **Was Occupy London anti-capitalist?**

A large banner declaring "Capitalism is crisis" was prominently displayed above the tents at St. Paul's and for some time Occupy was perceived, not least by the media, as an anti-capitalist protest. But the same banner had appeared at the 2009 Climate Camp. Occupy London protesters repeatedly tried to shake off the anti-capitalist label, and before long a less combative 'Democratize capitalism' banner took its place.

A key activist who considered himself anti-capitalist, explained: "We were afraid of using the anti-capitalist label. We wanted people to come and engage with us, rather than appear as anti-capitalists. We wanted people to come down and meet us, rather than having any pre-given particular political image" (interview 2). Naomi Calvin, one of Occupy's featured activists, in a public debate on 2 November 2011, happily announced that "the BBC is not anymore calling us anticapitalist...this is a significant change!" (Calvin, 2011). If, as we have suggested, Occupy London was fuelled mainly by the attention of the mass media and its constant thirst for recognition, the abandonment of the anti-capitalist label may have owed more to the group's public relations strategy than to any shift in its political analysis. Nevertheless, the muting of anti-capitalist voices seemed to be more consonant with the protest's generally moderate message and aims.

In our interviews with them, activists expressed some anti-capitalist sentiments, but they articulated at best a very shallow critique of elements of the prevailing socioeconomic system, echoing much of what might be described as romantic anti-capitalism, reminiscent of the reaction by part of the intelligentsia against rapid industrialisation at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, it was a critique mostly on the moral level, on issues such as bankers' bonuses or the privileged tax regime enjoyed by big corporations, rather than a critique of the capitalist system as such. However, of even greater interest is the fact that a significant number of interviewees did not frame capitalism as a problem at all.

"I am not an anti-capitalist...capitalism has done great in the past" (Spiter interview 11). "Anti-capitalism has been a label, which induces fear in people, and thus it has been adopted by the media to induce this very fear. Through capitalism people get their security and the warmth in their home" (Dan interview 17). Obi saw himself as "a capitalist with a small 'c'", as he owns a small business. For him, the problem is not capitalism, but what he calls "corporatocracy" (interview 1). Dani believed that capitalism could be put to a good cause (interview 23). "Not all of us are anti-capitalists. Some of us think capitalism is OK, however it shouldn't be about a few businesses swallowing up all the wealth." (Tami interview 19).

Thus it is evident that not only did Occupy fail to engage in a systemic analysis of modern capitalism and how it generated the crisis, or make any attempt to form an alternative plan or vision, but it apparently did not even aspire to do so. There was a limited critique, mainly of aspects of 'neoliberalism', but neoliberalism was not seen as a necessary stage for capital's survival nor as the dominant regime of accumulation in this period of crisis; it was instead seen as an elite-driven political project that could be undone without questioning the fundamentals of the capitalist mode of production. Many protesters consciously disavowed the anti-capitalist label, sincerely believing that it was only the derailing of the system from some golden past that had caused the crisis. Occupy might thus be understood as a more or less reformist protest, whose main addressee was the state, in a call for some intervention here and there to restore a (mostly imaginary) lost balance.<sup>4</sup>

### **A prefigurative rather than political movement**

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<sup>4</sup> When asked 'who or what is to blame for the "unsustainable financial system" and lack of social justice?', most of those who responded to the CCC survey mentioned banks / and the governments that failed to regulate them: 29% explicitly mentioned banks / bankers / financiers / financial institutions, alone or in combination, but 34% blamed governments / politicians, usually for failing to regulate banks / financial interests effectively. Just 4% explicitly mentioned neo-liberalism / neo-liberal economic policies, and only 17% explicitly blamed capitalism / the capitalist system and, of these, several specified 'flaws in the capitalist system' or government's failure to regulate capitalism.

Yet although the reformist element was present in Occupy, it was not the dominant characteristic of the protest. The prevailing ethos of Occupy was not political but moral, emphasising individual rather than social change. Mostly focused on appeals at the level of consciousness, it had a strongly prefigurative character; that is, it was keen to serve as a model and as a microcosm for how social relations and interactions *ought* to operate.

David Graeber, a fierce supporter of the Occupy movement on both sides of the Atlantic, has emphasised the prefigurative ethos of such movements, seeing them as 'theme parks' of direct democracy and egalitarianism, and proposing the term "contaminationism" to signify "the idea that all people really needed was to be exposed to the experience of direct action and direct democracy, and they would want to start imitating it all by themselves" (Graeber 2007). Graeber saw contaminationism functioning in the global justice movement and he had faith in its potential in Occupy, where "the camps were always primarily an advertisement, a defiant experiment in libertarian communism" (Graeber 2013, p. 427). Boni, a prominent Occupy London activist, emphasized the importance of this: "People don't only change politics as a result of argument, but also as a result of experience. And Occupy was an experience leading to a transformation, and this is why people will continue being politically engaged. People did not leave the same persons from Occupy" (interview 2).

This prefigurative ethos was also evident among other activists interviewed in Occupy London camps. For Carmel, the best thing the movement can achieve is to "operate as a model and show the world how well a society can work if we all co-operate" (interview 9). George said that he participated full-time in Occupy "to show them that we have created a viable alternative, a system where there is no higher state authority or monetary system and which nevertheless functions perfectly well" (interview 24).

We expected that a protest lacking a political orientation and emphasising the prefigurative element would mainly deliver a message on the level of consciousness, and this seems to be validated by our interviews with activists. "Actually, very little needs to be changed in the system. It's the mindset of the people that's the problem. I see this as a movement of consciousness" (Adrian interview 5). "People need to change their minds first. Human greed is the main problem, not capitalism" (Chucky interview 25).

A moralistic ethos prevalent in Occupy went hand in hand with an uneasiness with modern culture, morality and the way of life of the common people. In addition, materialism was considered as one of the main problems of our society. Thus, although Occupy claimed to represent the 99%, for many activists this 99% was part of the problem. As one Occupier put it, "We don't need a lot of the comforts that we've become accustomed to ... We don't necessarily need all the technological advancement, as useful as it is, in order to live. The fear of having these things taken away stops us from considering any other options that we have" (Dan interview 18). As Katie put it, "The

idea of having fun because you have a lot of money needs to change. People need to stop being materialistic" (interview 26).

Bill took this moralism to its logical limit: "Humankind is the craziest thing in nature and we have moved away from nature and animals, we are going to the supermarket and consuming whatever we want. The system is good in theory, it has worked well for decades until the banks got off track, until they got obsessed with money and other mental disorders" (interview 21). "We don't need that much...*they* make us believe we need all these things. We don't need economic growth. What we need is to spread out what we've got. We don't need to keep making stuff, but spread out what we've got, 'cause we've got enough, we just need to share them. Share, co-operate and not destroy the environment" (Chloe interview 15). Inca also points to the 'Average Jo's apathy' as one of the main problems: "There is a spiritual apathy towards fellow men and women. This protest is a plea to people: we are in tents, we are freezing; take courage from what we sacrifice and do something! ... We are trying to inspire a new kind of consciousness that does not need as many material things and does not equate happiness with an enormous amount of material wealth" (interview 30). It seems unlikely that this anti-materialist narrative could ever have wide appeal. Occupy's form and cultural codes, which could not be easily endorsed by most people, are probably the most telling explanation for its small size.

In Occupy, but also generally in the ethos of modern social movements and parts of the Left, more and more the personal is considered political. This is a tendency that finds fertile ground as the horizon of politics and the belief in grand projects of total social transformation and emancipation have shrunk (Furedi, 2005). It flourishes in a consciousness raising protest such as Occupy. Katie sums it up: "This is a movement of consciousness. From the relationship you have with people to the furniture you buy...everything is linked. Bankers and the 1% don't realize that what they do is bad and they think they deserve what they earn" (interview 26). For Thom, individual choices can strike a blow against the system: "Get away from multinational companies and get neighbours shopping together, make food co-operatives and put the money together. This will scare them more than any political change" (interview 27). Ginder asserted that "People have to change their consciousness. We cannot carry on blaming the system for the problems that we take part in. Individuals need to change the way they think and operate within the system. The system only exists because of the mass of people choosing to follow it. If they decide to change the way they are, for example buy locally, this system will cease to exist because this mass of people will stop feeding it" (interview 28).

Predictably, this moralistic attitude coexisted harmoniously with a New Age tendency to inner exploration and fulfilment; after all, if the personal is political, the self and the body become a subject of immanent importance. This resulted in a shallow spirituality that at times seemed to be an opt-out from the current moment of the social crisis and the political battlefield. "Humanity is detached from itself, no longer self-aware; instead of operating on a level of feeling, we get lost in a mindset of alienating structures, and the more we do that, the more psychopathic in nature we become. It's a



mindset” (Adrian interview 5). Sandy went further: “This is a spiritual movement. We are focusing on the now. Living in the moment is more important than making long-term plans. Forget fear and remember love” (interview 29).

## Conclusion

Occupy London was a protest phenomenon that can be understood on three levels: as a protest influenced by various protest actions in 2011 in other parts of the world; as a reaction to the financial crisis as it was experienced by elements of British society; and as the latest instance in the long history of grassroots protests in Britain. If Occupy London lacked the political vigour and the challenging character of roughly contemporaneous movements in some other countries, it was perhaps because, faced with financial crisis, British society and political culture proved relatively resilient. Despite pay freezes and / or below-inflation pay rises across the public and private sectors, a sharply devalued currency, and consequently depressed living standards for the vast majority of Britons, levels of employment in Britain remained surprisingly buoyant. Thus Britain, despite the heroic proportions of its banking and debt crisis and the economic depression that produced, was less severely hit by the financial crisis than some other countries, such as Greece or Spain, where thematically similar movements sprang up. For that reason, it is understandable that the rhetoric, narrative, targets and class resonance of Occupy London should have been more moderate than those of other movements facing a more ominous social predicament. In Britain, dire predictions of mass unemployment and immiseration were not fulfilled, and the massive, disruptive protests they were expected to produce did not materialise. Doubtless the moderation of British political culture played a part, but firm policing of demonstrations in 2010-2011 and stern judicial sentencing of violent protesters forestalled the escalation of protest when it did occur.

Against this background, Occupy London was mostly a protest at the level of consciousness raising, with an unclear narrative, little in the way of political analysis but plenty of generalizations, moralistic slogans and scapegoating of easy targets (mainly ‘greedy bankers’ and ‘tax cheating’ corporations). It claimed to represent the 99%, but it considered the material aspirations of the 99% to be part of the problem. Although its speakers claimed that “the best way of understanding it is to join in” (Calvin, 2011), the demanding nature of Occupy’s form of action made mass participation improbable.

Sympathetic observers praised Occupy’s prefigurative character, its organizational horizontality and the strictly egalitarian values it upheld. Yet Occupy London, though it succeeded in building strong ties of identity among a small number of activists, failed to provide a positive vision for the millions who suffered losses as the crisis unfolded. That failure, however, mirrors the ideological and political weakness of

the Left in Britain, and it would be harsh to condemn Occupy for shortcomings where political parties, trade unions and even intellectual imagination also failed.

We are left to reflect on the puzzle of London's place in the transnational diffusion of the 2011 wave of contention. In his account of the 'colour revolutions', Mark Beissinger (2007) suggested that as the wave of mobilisation spread from countries where the structural conditions for political transformation were well laid to those where conditions were less structurally conducive, so the permutations of outcomes of modular action expanded, with a greater likelihood of violent conflict in the latter cases. It might be supposed that, because Occupy London came late in the international sequence and was, in its scale if not its duration, a poor relation to OWS, Britain was less 'structurally conducive' for such mobilisations. Certainly, Occupy was noticeably less confrontational than its American counterparts.

Platitudes about the moderation of British political culture aside, the explanation is that Britain came not late but early to the wave of contention, and that the earliest protests – the student demonstrations of the autumn and winter of 2010-11 – produced a configuration of protest and state response that was profoundly discouraging to large-scale contentious protest. The events of 2010-11 in London demonstrated that, whilst non-violent peaceful protest was tolerated, and generally facilitated, by the police, it was ineffective in changing the austerity policies of the government or the practices of corporations. Confrontational, invasive, disruptive and / or violent protest, however, was not only vigorously repressed by the police and the courts, but, mediated by a predictably hostile press, it also produced a massive public backlash such that the substance of protest was drowned out by the volume of the condemnation of its forms. By October 2011, no British activist could have harboured any illusions about the will and the capacity of the state to repress disruptive protest.

London activists were inspired and encouraged by and picked up themes from protests elsewhere in Europe, North Africa and the US, but Occupy London was not simply a product of transnational diffusion. It was, rather, an attempt in the particular conditions of London in late 2011 to fashion an alternative repertoire of action to those that had failed in the very recent past, and it was profoundly influenced by the positive legacies, the forms and internal practices of the most recent instances of innovative and successful non-violent protests in Britain – the Camps for Climate Action. Certainly Occupy London took some of its cues from the transnational wave of protest, but its realisation was rooted in the local context and reflected the recent experience of protest in Britain.

The general lesson that might be drawn from this is that the transnational diffusion of protest is an impression fostered by distance. In fact, protest is not so much transnationally modular as it is embedded in local and national contexts and the particular conjunctions of protest action and state response.

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