

Occupy Action! Collective Actions & Emotions in Public Places

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Abstract

In recent times there is an accelerated movement in the privatization of public land. Some representative cases are the names of subway stops and central squares being associated with the brands of large corporations. Consequently the city centers are becoming an ambiguous territory making it unclear what is public and private. Additionally these newly established social practices have consequences and poses questions as where private ground begins (and ends) and how the freedom to use such spaces are affected? The privatization of public land appears to be an encroaching process and standard as similar patterns were found in other European cities. In our research, we have observed that a chronotope has been generated and repeated in this process. Similarities in London and Madrid were found during our ethnographic work allowing us to assert that any change or social transformation happens as a product of its historical context. The purpose of this paper is to present the Occupy Movement as a collective action and to create an archive that supports collective actions and emotions. The results of this analysis will show how to recognize if a square is private, public or *almost-public*.

Keywords: Social Movements, Occupy Movement, Emotions, Public/Private Space, Online/Offline Space

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Introduction

In this paper, I will present some occupied places, either real and physical or virtual and online. It is important to consider the Occupy Movement not only as an occupation of a square or building, but also as a re-appropriation of something that we believe to be ours, even though, in a specific way, it has now been altered. Moreover, it is possible to occupy with just an individual action, a social action, or a performance.

Michel Foucault, in 1983, gave six lectures at the University of California in Berkeley expounding on the concept of *Parrhesia* as a mode of discourse in which one speaks openly and truthfully about one's opinions and ideas without the use of rhetoric, manipulation, or generalizations. In other words, stating everything frankly.

Foucault said “[my] intention was not to deal with the problem of truth, but with the problem of the truth-teller or truth-telling as an activity. By this I mean that, for me, it was not a question of analyzing the internal or external criteria that would enable the Greeks and Romans, or anyone else, to recognize whether a statement or proposition is true or not. At issue for me was rather the attempt to consider truth-telling as a specific activity, or as a role.” (Michel Foucault, 2001:15)

So the *parrhesiastes* is someone who takes a risk. For example as Foucault explains, “you see a friend doing something wrong and you tell him what you think despite the risk of him being angry at you, you are acting as a *parrhesiastes*. In such a case, you do not risk your life, but you may hurt him by your remarks, and your friendship may consequently suffer from it. If, in a political debate, an orator risks losing his popularity because his opinions are contrary to the majority's opinion, or his opinions may usher in a political scandal, he uses *parrhesia*. *Parrhesia*, then, is linked to courage in the face of danger: it demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger. And in its extreme form, telling the truth takes place in the “game” of life or death.” (Michel Foucault, 2001:16)

For the Occupy Movement (OM) this means to say everything frankly. Also in the OM statements may be said in a brutal way many times, because it is an affirmation of the truth. Some say it is comparable to symbolic violence in society. (René Girard, 1987)

The OM is a movement focused on discourse – discourse as action, as a performative act according to John Austin (1975). “I occupy” means “I am doing something” – “I am here and I live” – producing an action, a movement.

The OM is an everyday practice. It is a continuous performance in our daily lives. How? Why? These are the questions that we will examine in this paper.

What is an Innovative and Collective Action?

The OM is spontaneous and exceptional:

- It is spontaneous as it is formed in a few days, without political or organiza-

tional barriers, and involves many citizens who until prior to that moment had remained outside any social movement.

- It is exceptional because of the time and space where/when the movement appears. For example in Puerta de Sol or Zuccotti Park one finds the display of technological devices everywhere. These locations (through both the offline and online worlds) have gained importance and intensity through communication. The uniqueness of the OM results in a collective subjectivity – “others” in the same position towards the subject. They share their social unrest, generating innovative speech/dialog and claiming the public space. A subject can create a new space, a habitat (and inhabit it) in a temporary situation.

It makes ones emotions – what they have inside visible. Not only are discursive practices are visible, but they are also in a public space. Through the use of posters and banners, the invisible is made visible. The emotions that stay inside the individual – feeling isolated, being unemployed, poor, living in precarious conditions at home, can rise up outside, in the street, and on social media such as Twitter etc. And finally they are manifested as real, strong, “with colors,” sharing with thousands of individuals this unrest, because this unrest is not only individual, it is a social unrest.

Collective Action in Public Spaces

The exceptionality of the OM gives rise to a collective subjectivity, a sharing of social unrest and generates innovative speech and can re-appropriate public spaces. It creates a body capable of making visible what is contained inside – its emotions.

This body exists also in the virtual space of the internet by using social networks to mobilize people. With a physical presence of bodies (at the Puerta del Sol, Zuccotti park, etc.), voices (ideas, posters, banners, tweets, meetings) and emotions (invisible, yet tangible) constitute this mixture that can be understood as a machine: technologies being fused with the bodies.

Many of the bodies present in the square are involved: shouting, approving, arguing, composing banners, as well tweets, text messages, capturing images/video to share on social networks. For Deleuze (1983), the first category of his movement-image concept is the perception of the image as the first material moment of subjectivity. It's the moment in which the subject emerges. It is a set of images which provide the information for thought, action, and emotion. The second moment of subjectivity is the action, which conveys the visual enactment of inner volition through materially embodied social acts (Deleuze, 1983:67). The last moment is the affection-image that occupies the gap between perception and action.

In the OM real space and virtual space intersect and combine, enriching the linguistic chaos and expressing the social unrest via different vehicles, such as plastic chairs and mobile phones. Common objects for the common people give voice to the thousands of bodies in a system that does not usually allow these voices to easily express themselves. A camping-like place, the offline world, and an internet accessible mobile phone, the online world, both have a power capable of fighting

against formal institutions. This ability to put forth the body with wider repertoire than just language is a feature of a mutant-figure, a body that can beat the state with improved lungs so to speak – thanks to a fuller set of voices, emotions, and new technologies. This mutant is a figure evolving from Donna Haraway's cyborg (1990). Through mainly new technologies, the OM body is a blend of the digital and analog, the virtual and real world, as powered through both online and offline experiences.

Thomas Hirschhorn says about his "Crystal of Resistance" exhibition in the Venezia Biennale 2011: "resistance is a conflict between creativity and destruction. I want my work to stand in the conflict zone, I want my work to stand erect in the conflict and be resistant within it."

Rebuilding the metropolitan jungle – the precarious transformation and reorganization of the public space as a new city is an extreme example of disorder and chaos. The plastic chairs and mobile phones for the online and offline body with voices and emotions between the OM and the plaza.

Paolo Virno, in his book *A Grammar of the Multitude*, says that the multitude moves between innovation and negation (Virno, 2004). His question is: How can this fragile multiplicity form a just social order?

To answer this question, Virno turns to language and ritual. From Wittgenstein, Virno borrows the distinction between rules and regularities. Here is where we can see his contribution to the past decade's heightened attention to the issues of sovereignty, the state, and the "state of exception."

Rather than merely finding in the "state of exception" an expansion of domination, Virno finds ambivalence in the fact that this type of political decision is rooted not in formal rules, but in their suspension. The political decision belongs not to rules but to regularities, and regularities are not stable constants. As emotional performances, they constitute openness to the world, fraught with uncertainty and danger, as well as being the source of innovation. These regularities ensure uncertainty, oscillation, and disturbance, thus providing the conditions not just for enhanced sovereignty but for exodus as well.

With this argument, Virno seeks to establish a source for the "right to resistance." He defines innovative action and creativity as "forms of verbal thought that consent to varying their own behavior in an emergency situation." (Virno, 2004:71). He finds in the structure of jokes the ultimate diagram of innovative action, insofar as they are an unexpected deviation from routine.

Also, the vision of the intellectual proletariat proposed by Negri (2005) is characterized by being precarious and digitally dangerous. It is a group that deftly knows how to use the powerful tools of innovative social discourse, new technologies, and related practices. The OM has created a very dangerous precedent for the political class as it has generated a *before* and an *after* in social movements.

In 2011, however, a series of social struggles shattered the prior common sense and began to construct a new one. The Occupy Wall Street movement was the most visible, but it was only one moment in a cycle of struggles that shifted the ground underneath political debates and opened new possibilities for political action over the year.

Movements of revolt and rebellion provide us with the means not only to refuse the repressive regimes under which the subjective figures suffer, but also to invert these subjectivities in relationship to power. They discover, in other words, new forms of independence and security on economic as well as social and communicational grounds, which together create the potential to derail systems of political representation and assert their own powers of democratic action. These are some of the accomplishments that these movements have already carried out and can be developed further.

For instance, what happened in the Lavapies district of Madrid just a couple of months after the 15M Movement is a clear example of citizen empowerment in a public space that led to the creation of discourse supporting the legitimization of citizenship itself. (15M was a large pro-democracy movement in 60 Spanish towns that began on the 15th of May 2011). The assembly of people in the square of Lavapies began in response to police trying to stop a young man who did not have the required documentation at a police checkpoint in a subway station. The crowd reacted spontaneously and directly confronted the police in a peacefully way. Acts like these are a clear sign that the 15M has created a precedent.¹

To consolidate and strengthen the powers of such subjectivities, though, another step is needed. The movements, in fact, already provide us with a series of constitutional principles that can be the basis for a constituent process. One of the most radical and far-reaching elements of this cycle of movements, for example, has been the rejection of representation and the construction instead of schemas of democratic participation. As Tomas Ibañez says: “It’s not enough that something is possible to happen” (Ibañez, 2006).

Between the Square and the Screen

The border between the virtual and non-virtual is nebulous, uncertain, and difficult to define. According to Bakhtin (1981), the transformation of a date, a time and space, a chronotope in a collective, such as in 15M, is a redefinition of meaning.

It is difficult to define where a hashtag first appears, for example. Did it appear first in twitter, or on banners from Zuccotti Park? This is one of the questions we ask when trying to study how the virtual and non-virtual intersect, how they combined at the square as a set of speeches, emotions, and new technologies.

While researching, it was possible to observe that there were more people on the street than people tweeting. One of the slogans chanted in the square was one of outraged saying just that: “No Twitter, no Facebook – We are on the street.” But, for the first time, thanks (largely) to the new technology coming fully into our private

lives, this data can be analyzed by comparing the interplay between the virtual and the non-virtual. The Occupy Movement is a mixture of digital and analog, virtual and non-virtual, the online and offline world. Many people in the squares, while shouting, agreeing, arguing, and carrying banners, would in real time post messages or tweets on social networks and share images. Moreover they were also organized thanks to the presence of virtual town squares aligned with virtual social identities.

Participants took photos in the square, and later used a hashtag, to disseminate what was the current situation or what was “trendy” or simply what could, at that point in time, have been more effective. It is therefore difficult to understand from where one label originated. Was it first on the screen or heard at the square or on a placard? Many signs and banners were proposed and reproduced. Did the banner lead to the hashtag or was it vice versa? Regardless, the environment of the square itself was an incubator for the creation of hashtags. For example the hashtag of the feminist movement in the square was changed from #todosen-laplaza to #todasenlaplaza.

The hashtag #Acampadasol also had to fight face to face with #spanishrevolution, a label that did not seem right to many people at the square, but it generated in the online world much more powerful effects and impact than its rival. Additionally it was revealed that using an English hashtag had more impact on Twitter than using a Spanish one. Deleuze (1985) argues that a visual presentation of ‘living present’ is a contraction of instance, like these tweets with text and images. His time-image concept is a combination of past and future in the present moment.

This is the chaos of linguistic landscapes. As Shohamy explains, the linguistic landscape is symbolically constructed in social and public spaces (Shohamy, 2008). It is a material and immaterial construction like the pictures in Puerta del Sol and Zuccotti Park. The history of the city is also articulated by social movements, and the appropriation of public space. This re-appropriation as described from 2011 has been articulated as follows in many cities worldwide: a square, its people, buildings, camps, have been exported to other places in other cities. They utilize the same manner of organization, the same structure and the same posters. For example on Twitter the hashtags *camping* or *occupy* have expanded in the same way as those incurred during the 15M movement and are making requests for the same intellectual tools and materials. The OM has generated digital files and a collective memory supported by the tools of humanity and technology. In these other venues each person has become a journalist in the square through documenting, photographing, sharing, and online posting. For the first time the traditional real media are directly and deeply concerned. The public can now have first-hand information, thereby making the old news sources obsolete.

Between Public and Private Places

In the recent past there has been a debate in London regarding Granary Square. It is the public square near the large King’s Cross railway station. This is an open and public space, like so many in the UK, which is gradually being privatized. A

similar debate is being generated in cities such as Madrid and Barcelona. In recent times the privatization of public places has been gaining prominence. Some representative cases are the corporate brand names of subway stops or central squares. The centers of cities are becoming ambiguous territory, between what is public and private. To address the ambiguous consequences of the existing social practices citizens are formulating questions such as: Where does the privatized square begin and where does it end? How is my freedom being affected in using this space?

Institutions are making it difficult to know which public spaces have been purchased by private entities. In some countries it is not permitted for the general public to know which public spaces have been privatized. It is a tortuous process to gain access to this information, depending on the council responsible. In some cases it is necessary to formally ask the competent authorities, traversing bureaucratic processes, and paying fees in order to obtain such knowledge. There are also many other tactics that hinder the public from obtaining this information.



Figure 1. Photographic elaboration of Granary Square (London). Photograph: King's Cross Central.

In the United Kingdom this information may be obtained first hand. Thanks to the initiative of The Guardian newspaper, a collaborative map is being charted of the territories identified as “private” via a digital platform or through the hashtag #keeppublic. Users can map the territory, through photos, and documents. It is creating a collaborative map to identify streets, parks, beaches or other privatized areas. The organizers of this initiative report that this mapping is not meant to alarm the population, but simply to identify and report privatized spaces and thus sensitize the citizens about “public” land. Once again, it is now possible to see how an online platform plays an open massive role in mobilizing and empowering people. It is one way to reappropriate something that once belonged to citizens, and now no longer seems to be in their hands, and nor especially their feet.

According to Naomi Colvin, an activist from #occupy, “It is a vision of society in which you work and you shop. At times when you are not working or shopping, you may go to restaurants.” With this critical and ironic perspective it can be understood that places are becoming more like entertainment venues, rather than a

space to meet, discuss, and protest. We can imagine, and sometimes see with our own eyes that these quasi-public spaces are quite similar to quasi-squares or multiplex theaters in the suburbs of cities. These are sites where consumers are between films, queuing for popcorn and waiting for people who have not yet arrived. Privatized spaces can be converted into a large container of junk food restaurants, replicated terraces, green plants without fragrance, artificial cleaning and trash. A vivid, busy square footprint becomes an archaeological landscape.

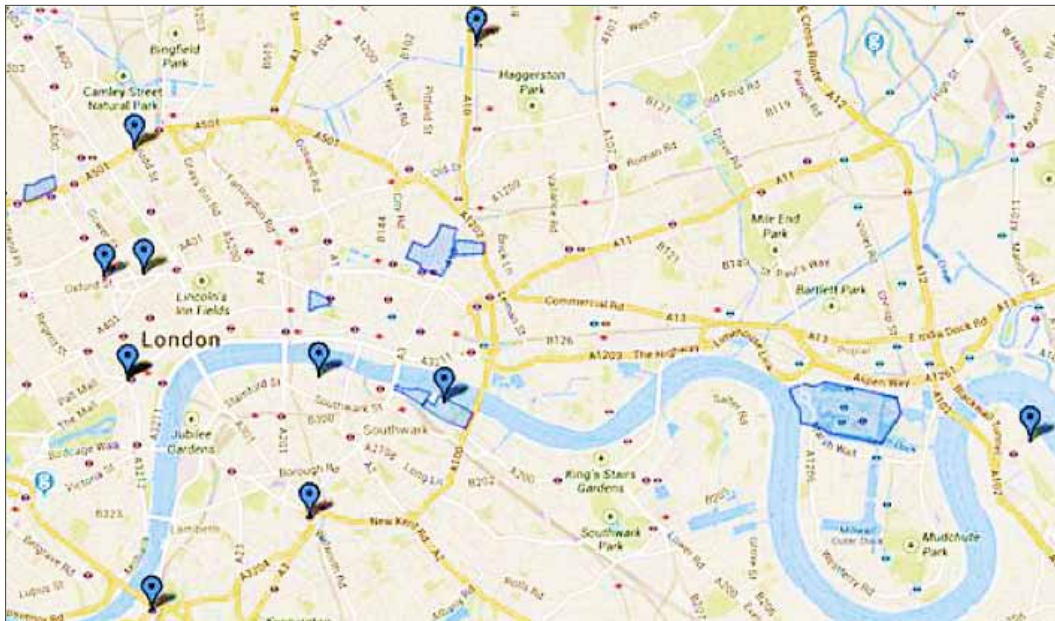


Figure 2. Example of privatized public spaces map in the city of London. For a complete map of the UK, open the following link: https://www.google.com/fusiontables/DataSource?docid=1lrNKscwda7NNc9rrq_Si9dhBqZAbv1Cv2Bx-o7s.

Thanks to the Occupy Movement, we have witnessed several public reappropriations of several iconic urban places. Places have been open to dialogue in the Polis of Ancient Greece and the congregation centers and hangouts of the main activities of today's civic spaces. The OM, for example, was instrumental in illustrating to the public what it means to reappropriate public land. It also exposed spaces that were posed as public spaces, but were in reality no longer publicly owned. A common space is open to everybody, according to general opinion. By the time you gather on this ground, that's when you get kicked, stopped and eventually you are denied this space, and then the concept of public ownership starts to gain a new meaning:

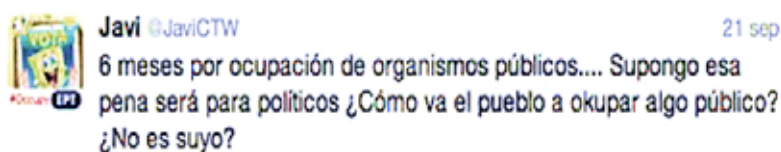


Figure 3. Screenshot. Rough translation: 6 months (penalty) for the occupation of a public space... what is the penalty for politicians... the space is not theirs. How can people be guilty of squatting in a place that is already public?

The question we asked ourselves after the eviction of many places in the world is the same question posed by the tweet of @JaviCTW: Why are we evicted from a public space that is precisely designed for these types of gatherings and public discourse (discussions – protesting – meetings – etc.)? If a space is defined as public it means by definition it is open to the public. Then why is something that is public suddenly renamed and privatized without first receiving consent from the general public? The OM's reappropriation of public space is a social tool to expose broadly what is *endangered* and what is to be protected.

The square in the social imagination is a space that can be lived in, walked through, stepped on, and in general publicly utilized, but never sold. We have never heard of these places being purchased or acquired; these actions occur to buildings, houses, shops, galleries or private roads. But not squares.

Furthermore we cannot leave traces of our presence as citizens in a public space like this; it's a feature that does not belong to a privatized square. The following is an example of what happened in the hours after the eviction of 15M in Madrid: The cleaning staff of the City of Madrid came in to sweep, flush the place with water, and disinfect it in order to remove all traces of camping residues from its bricks. They were trying to erase everything that happened there during the previous day, thinking that it would scrub it away from the offline world. They did not want to leave any signs, or a physical memory at the square. But what one would notice is that although the physical world of the square was well cleaned, there is still a square preserved with the memories of those days and nights of claiming and reappropriation of this public space online. Just to walk around the square virtually, you can still feel, hear and see the hundreds of voices, banners and infrastructures that were still present in our lives during that time. There is no monument or plaque for that. The antecedent is in our minds and in the world's digital memory; we know that if it worked once, we can repeat it. And others throughout the world can improve their lives through the practice of public reappropriation that OM offers.

For this reason, there is a political class that is looking for another solution for future demonstrations or protests. A strategy to prevent or modify some of the possible dynamics that OM has generated towards the privatization of public spaces. The streets, parks, squares and any open spaces are being redefined as a private space after a transformation, or a restructuring and are architecturally *clean*. It is a standardization phase that happens both in Madrid and in London. It is characterized by similar patterns consisting of a chronotope repeating the same guidelines for privatizing public squares. This chronotope is the time and space of every experience, according to Mikhail Bakhtin. It helps explain the fact that any change or social transformation happens as a product of a particular historical context.

After the OM begins to establish practices of privatization of a public space with almost identical characteristics to each other, it becomes possible to understand the concept of authorship in the chronotope. Thanks to the chronotope we can recognize, for example, the author of a text, simply from a few pages of his work,

or the artist of a painting, simply by an individual piece of work. And we can recognize a process of privatization of public space, simply because of some practices that are replicated in a given time interval in a specific space. Below is a list of some guidelines to try to answer the question of how do you recognize if a square is private or public?:

- Terraces of private businesses appear where there weren't any before
- The same goes for advertising posters or special offers from shops around the square
- The square begins to slowly lose identity, it is changing some of its infrastructure (benches, fountains, etc.)
- It changes its name or a new one is added. Or people begin to call it by a trade or brand name that has stolen the identity of the square
- Structural or procedural difficulties are established to impede the public desiring to host an assembly or a demonstration
- It becomes a cultural graveyard, where memory recalls something has happened, or used to happen there, but the fast food signs serve to hide this memory etc.



Figure 4. Construction in Granary Square (October 2013).

The time range for the transformation of a public space is not slow nor fast. Every city has time, dynamics, contexts and different actors, and for this reason it is impossible to compare Madrid with London. But it is possible to design this path and see how standards and patterns are repeated in the same manner and in the same way. Thanks to chronotope, we can see how our streets have been transformed, are changing and will lose their identity.

The Future of the Occupy Movement

The next step would be to try to imagine how the future will engage with the Occupy Movement in new urban scenarios. How will the private citizens use their new spaces? One could reach a quite legitimate conclusion where at some point the new owner of a formerly public square refuses the right of entry to the public or implements some set of encroaching restrictions. There is a closing down at the fringes of the city that used to allow entry to these places. Is this the strategy of the political class to solve the future occupations of these places? The political class appears unable to counter collective actions through their powerful ability to call on online world organizations while it is trying to raise new barriers in the offline world as well as the online world.

The privatization of public spaces can be viewed as a policy to prevent future use of public reappropriations as a weapon. The result is an increase of quasi-public spaces where their owners do not have to offer any explanation for requesting protesters or people who they just “do not want” in their territory, to vacate. They are excellent excuses to stop, or to punish future generations or to force undesirables to leave who would otherwise want to make public their right to demonstrate in city squares.

Probably in the not too distant future the OM will conduct a focused trial on UK's Paternoster Square before notifying its owner Mitsubishi with Vodafone to open their doors and leave us their space for a few hours on a Saturday afternoon. The selling and buying of public spaces has never been as profitable and rewarding as it is today. For this reason it is accelerating and is clearly taking place these days in the UK. Consequently it is understandably a good strategy to sensitize the public to these current dynamics. The UK's mapping and monitoring of this privatization of public land by its citizenship is a good exercise in urban ecology and making visible what others are trying to hide. In the process of privatization of public space, it is essential to understand the standards that constitute this chronotope and try to outline the next steps of this movement to outmaneuver privatization so that it will be possible to reappropriate public squares after they have been sold, bought, and modified. The privatization of public land, although occurring at different times and spaces, follows the same patterns and agendas despite their contextual differences. A fuller study of these patterns is needed to compare and contrast these different situations leading to the development of a common strategy of resistance.



Figure 5. A window advertisement.

Endnotes

- 1 See video: Crisith36 (2011) "Vecinos de Lavapiés se enfrentan a la policía Por las Redadas a Extranjeros no comunitarios." Youtube.com www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=oZV2pNs-7c0. (accessed April 16, 2013).

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