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# OCCUPYING LONDON

post-crash resistance and the  
foreclosure of possibility

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## Declaration

The research below is unique to this thesis with the exception of data collected in 2012 which formed part of a dataset of a master's thesis completed at the University of York (2012) before being merged with the data of 2013 and 2014 for this work. My PhD was funded through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on a three year (+3) basis at York (White Rose) DTC and then at Warwick DTC. The work presented here is my own and has not been submitted for examination elsewhere.

## Abstract

If the financial crisis was an opportunity to challenge and replace free market (neoliberal) capitalism; then why has nothing radically changed? It seemed to me that we might find answers to this question by studying those movements which sought to actually bring change about in the post-crash moment and what foreclosures they faced in resisting the reassertion of neoliberalism. As such, over three summers (2012, 2013, 2014) I interviewed and observed Occupy London, learning about the movement and discussing with activists involved what challenges and problems they faced in attempting to resist the continuation of this system after the crash. Indeed, this seemed particularly important to study in a situation where that ideology which caused the crisis in the first place, appeared to be not only continuing 'by default' and presenting itself as the only 'sensible' way forwards, but also seemed to be dominating society as a set of normative cultural values.

I begin by arguing that the tactic of occupation and the collective identity of 'we are the 99%' carried radical potential, insofar as they both indicated an intention to present an organised and symbolically consistent appearance, which aimed to qualitatively stretch their grievances to others. Against that which designated the movement as 'nothing to see here' and as something which should simply 'move along'; occupation also gave an opportunity to make the 'nonsense' idea (that there could be an alternative) appear *against its designation as nonsense*.

However, it is my contention that any possibilities of resistance and change which occupation and 'we are the 99%' suggested, were unable to be capitalised upon by the Occupy movement in London. Firstly, I point to pragmatic issues of pervasive individualism and libertarianism within the movement, which created disorganisation, symbolic inconsistency and a limitation of their ability to extend beyond the movement itself. Furthermore, I also argue against ideas that Occupy was somehow able to create a structureless, open and prefigurative performance of an alternative society which was outside and untainted by wider social structures, instead demonstrating that this created a tendency to overlook inequalities that persisted within the movement.

Secondly and beyond these pragmatic issues, however, I also argue that such presuppositions of individualism, libertarianism and prefiguration - as well as the pursuit of authenticity and cynical constructions of power through conspiracy theory - indicated a common framework shared by Occupy London and *that which it was attempting to resist*. In other words, insofar as these assumptions and givens distributed both the activist's resistance *and* the post-crash reassertion of neoliberalism, I argue that Occupy unintentionally and counter-intuitively extended the normativity and power of that which it was attempting to refigure and challenge, whilst paradoxically playing into the marginalisation of its own appearance.

Rather than a scientific description, or a short sharp characterisation of post-crash resistance (which might either cynically dismiss such movements or romanticise them); the aim of my thesis was instead to trace the foreclosures *and* the unrealised potentialities of the movement over a period of time, allowing activists to be critical and reflexive through patient analysis.

## **Keywords**

Occupy London; Resistance; Power; Financial Crisis; Neoliberalism; Distribution of the Sensible; Post-politics; Foreclosure of Possibility; Genealogical Politics

Whilst sat on a wall at Finsbury Square, discussing the challenges and aspirations of the Occupy movement in London, we were interrupted by a fire engine which pulled up to the park and the exasperated officers which stepped out of it. Yet *again* they had been called to the protest camp in order to extinguish a fire which one of the occupiers kept relighting in a shopping trolley. "See that's the sort of rebellious thing tied to it, y'know?" said the activist I was talking to, "he likes to show off, y'know? He's had a bit of a tough life..." (2012:2). It seemed the fire-starter had a bit of a reputation at the camp for causing trouble. I asked how long he had been here for:

"Yeah, he's been here all the time... we've got homeless people come in, y'know? His bark's worse than his bite. He had a go at someone the other day and they punched him right in the mouth and knocked him out, he's only a little guy. I mean, he's like a little terrier, y'know? He gets his bone and he won't let go of it. It's just things like that *make us look like twats* 'cause the fire brigade get called out..."

Despite it being May, the wet winter and spring of 2011-12 had had a lasting effect on this green space in the middle of London. There seemed to be very little grass left and, where there wasn't a tent or makeshift structure, there was mud, puddles and soggy cardboard duckboards. The shadows of the high-rises also made the air colder than it should be. The wall from which we were spectating probably once denoted the edge of the park, but now it was situated between the bulk of the camp and an 'info-tent' at the front. The patch of ground to our left was strewn with rubbish, wood, metal bins, as well as a now-smouldering trolley and the activist arguing with the fire officers nearby.

"There are people who came to Occupy and gave up their house or whatever... but I don't think there's many though who actually given up their house and their job to come *here*. He probably never worked in his life.

But he's been *dispossessed* and the only way he knows how to speak to people is like: 'I'll punch you out!' or whatever... 'Cause that's the way *the system* taught him how to survive, y'know? We have to tolerate him 'cause he's one of the dispossessed."

It had been three months since the flagship camp down the road at St Paul's cathedral had been violently evicted in the night following a court order – granted on the grounds of 'public hygiene' – to remove the protestors camping there. This made Finsbury Square the longest running Occupy campsite in the world (and proud of it); but it had nevertheless been sorely neglected by the ex-St Paul's activists, who saw the chaos and debris at Finsbury as a lost cause. The ex-St Paul's group were now withholding vital donation money needed to hire toilets or buy food for the campers.

"We want people to come and get involved but, as I say, the way it is at the moment puts a lot of them off... We're still in a state of *being defined*, I think, whereas a lot of people think that Occupy *has* defined itself: 'this is what Occupy is, if you don't like it, fuck off' ... y'know? And there's about 100 people with that idea, like: 'this is what Occupy is' and it's *their little definition of Occupy*. But really they're wrong because Occupy is what people come in and tell us what it's about. *The people decide what it is*. If they decide it's just a load of crap and we're a bunch of idiots running round, they're going to think: 'why the fuck should I bother supporting a movement that's just a bunch of wasters?' You know what I mean?"

We were briefly interrupted again as two more occupiers ran around laughing and blasting each other with the camp's only fire extinguishers:

"I mean, you can see it happening. You can see it. Then everyone is saying: 'oh, *this is what Occupy is about...*' and there's about 100 different voices saying that, but it's not them who decide it, it's the public who decide! They're going to say: 'this ain't worth... it's a slum, it's just a slum full of tents. That's it. *Why should we be inspired to resist a capitalist system on the basis of a load of idiots in tents?* Why should we look at the actual inherent nature of everything our live have revolved around – going out and paying a mortgage or working or whatever – just because these people say there's a problem with it?"



As the city workers hurried past, they cast sidelong glances at the square and the Bistro where they used to spend working lunches (but which had been put out of business by the camp). Two men in suits and ties stood to our left simply shaking their heads at us. The info-tent to our right that was supposed to 'connect' the protest with the public yet stood abandoned with shelves of radical literature inside falling apart in the damp.

"I mean, all this is *bollocks* because there's nothing happening at the moment. Because we've been kicked out of St Paul's and pushed into here, there's a sort of sense of: 'oh, we're waiting for Occupy to do *something...*' Well, we've got to do something ourselves! We can't just sit here and lick our wounds. What are we going to actually *do* as some activity? I mean, at the moment, we're just making a fucking mess here, y'know? I mean, *these people here [pointing to the workers] find it difficult to find out what it is we're trying to achieve, y'know?*"

One month later on the 14<sup>th</sup> June 2012 and after a long stand-off with the police – including an incident where one protestor climbed a tree in the middle of the park – the Occupy camp at Finsbury Square was forcibly evicted by Islington Council.

## 1. Introduction: 'Now is the winter of our discount tents'<sup>1</sup>

The spring, summer and fall of 2011

"What am I resisting against? The *swollen bloated monster of private property* which is totally *out of control* (I describe it as a 'private property psychosis') and I think *the private realm has become so powerful now* it's at risk of taking entire cities over. And that's really dangerous for civil society, privacy, our ability to have space to live and not to work ridiculous hours to live in a tiny box. I think it comes down so much to *space*. And I think *private property is central to capitalism* and, when it gets out of control, then you have a dictatorship of private property where *private property becomes more important than the will of the people*, the democratic structures which are sovereign, or *should be* sovereign, in a democracy."

Occupy London Activist (2013:11)

Did the financial crash, crunch and crisis of 2007-8 open a *window of opportunity* for a radically different society? Or did the subsequent bail-outs and austerity measures imposed by neoliberal governments *close the door* on this possibility? If a *window*, through which the bright light of alternative horizons could be discerned, then why has nothing radically changed in those countries centrally affected by the collapse of international finance? Why has extreme inequality, for instance, not only persisted but *increased* since the crisis, with 95% of income gains since 2009 accruing to the top 1% (Barro 2013) and that same 1% expected to own *more than the global 99%* by 2016 (Oxfam 2015)? And if a *door*, which assertively slammed shut and closed off routes to potential alternatives, then how was the post-crash resurgence of resistance limited by this context? How was the apparent opportunity to create an alternative economy, society or government *foreclosed* in

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<sup>1</sup> Used with permission from 'The Spartacus Poem' by spoken-word poet and Occupy activist: Pete the Temp.

the face of a system of such blatant economic inequality, social injustice and democratic deficit, which was experiencing a severe crisis of legitimacy?

The immediate reaction to the financial crash could perhaps be described in terms of confusion. On the one hand, for those theorists and critics on the Left – suddenly finding themselves thrown into a position of apparent opportunity and possibility – the question was not only ‘how best to act?’, but also: ‘how best to organise collectively?’ and ‘how best to recognise who is actually on the Left in a context of fragmentation and in-fighting?’ Whereas, on the other hand, for politicians and economists on the Right – suddenly finding themselves thrown into a position of apparent embarrassment (after claiming they had found the perfect balance of state and economy with, to quote Gordon Brown, ‘no return to boom and bust’ (Summers 2008) – the question was not only ‘how to intervene and save the market whilst remaining true to free market principles?’, but also, ‘how best to maintain the legitimacy of the free market in the face of such failure?’ and ‘how to make critics see ‘reason’ and get business back to ‘normal’ as soon as possible?’

Their answer was a series of exceptional and unprecedented measures: negotiating state bailouts of corporations and banks deemed ‘too big to fail’ (i.e. too important for the economy to let collapse); designing rescue packages and loans for those nations so badly hit with debt that they risked creating further instability (but always with attached free market stipulations to cut public spending and privatise public services); instigating rounds of quantitative easing where the government effectively ‘printed money’ in an attempt to insert liquidity and flow into market trading; all offset by cutbacks in public spending and the selling-off of state assets in

order to ‘reduce the deficit’. Despite the crisis being directly linked to the recklessness of the financial sector, therefore, what these measures created was a *socialisation* of the crisis through *appeals to common sense* that ‘we need to balance the books’, that ‘we are giving too much away to work-shy shirkers’, and that – as David Cameron famously put it – ‘we’re all in this together’ (Richardson 2010).

It became unclear, however, whether these emergency actions were an admission of the *failure* of a socio-economic model that had been allowed to create the excessive risk which had led to the financial system’s eventual collapse. Or whether these unprecedented state measures were actually *an historical reassertion that there was simply no ‘rational’ alternative model of state or economy which could inform decisions on addressing the crisis*. Whilst, on the one hand, the financial crash and subsequent austerity threw the inequality and injustice of the financial system into the public eye, as well as drawing scrutiny to a (supposedly democratic) system of government that was not, in fact, appearing to work for ‘99%’ of the people. On the other hand, in order to understand how this system nevertheless managed to survive despite the crisis, it is important to recognise that these apparent failings and double standards remained ‘rational decisions’ and retained ‘legitimate authority’ in the sense that they were in-line with the predominant ideological framework of a ‘common sense’ approach to the state, economy and society. In other words, despite these approaches being drastic, *they were legitimised by remaining consistent with neoliberalism*.

By neoliberalism, I mean both a politico-economic doctrine and a hegemonic ideology. Firstly, in terms of the former, neoliberalism is a state approach to capitalism which presupposes that individual freedom can best be guaranteed by *neither* a hands-off (*laissez-faire*) approach to the market, *nor* by centralised regulation and redistribution, but by the state intervening in order to maintain market autonomy and competition with a “permanent vigilance, activity and intervention” (Foucault 2008:132). And secondly, in terms of a hegemonic ideology, neoliberalism should be understood as a set of dominant cultural norms and a guiding rationality for organising and understanding contemporary society. As such, more than a critics’ term utilised in order to vaguely insult politicians or economists (Harrison 2009), I take the position that a distinctly neoliberal history can firstly be recognised in political and economic thought, and secondly as predominant cultural norms and presuppositions in wider society.

In particular, the socio-economic doctrine can be traced right back to the dispute over method in the social sciences at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the translation of Weber’s *Economy and Society* (Gane 2014); through Von Mises’ critique of socialism at the Austrian school (where Hayek was a student) and the Ordoliberal creation of a post-war government in West Germany (where they argued the state needed to be strong enough to underpin ‘free’ market competition, see Peck 2010); as well as Hayek’s attempts to bring the Austrian and American traditions of free market thinking together at the Walter Lippmann Colloquium and the first meeting of the Mont Pelèrin Society (events directly funded by banking and corporate interests). A more recent history, however, also includes the application of this thinking by Friedman and the ‘Chicago Boys’ to South America (using state-funded

exchange programmes to educate Chilean economists and establish neoliberal governments through CIA-backed coups (Fischer 2009); through the application of this doctrine in the context of the stagflation which preceded the elections of Reagan and Thatcher; as well as the establishment of neoliberalism through 'undemocratic windows of opportunity' (see Klein 2008) created by the collapse of the USSR.

What this brief history also demonstrates, however, is that neoliberalism is complex, contradictory and inconsistent across time and space. Yet it nevertheless points to something of a recognisable 'thought collective' (Mirowski 2013) which has risen from the margins of economic theory during the ideological experiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to become *the* model (or 'ideal-type') of 'rational' state management and international market governance. Paradoxically, what seems to have given neoliberalism this prominence is precisely its inconsistency around the question of the state and where it can be said to have ventured 'too far' into the market. Indeed, this line is a huge point of contention within neoliberal theory itself, with the more libertarian arguing for absolutely no state intervention and advocating zero market regulation, whilst the more neo-conservative see the state as a necessary evil in maintaining moral standards, safeguarding 'traditional values' and 'foreign interests' (i.e. the military). On the one hand, this problem could maybe be seen as "neoliberalism's curse" in that "it can live neither with, nor without, the state" (Peck 2010:650), yet on the other hand, this internal inconsistency also allows the doctrine to legitimise power in the specificities and contingencies of each context it is applied to. Its vagueness, in other words, allows for a pick and mix of arguments that can legitimise the severe inequality and

democratic deficit of an unregulated free market, allowing much leeway in the extent to which the state can legitimately roll out and roll back its influence (Peck 2010).

Therefore, despite the bailouts, quantitative easing and austerity measures of the financial crisis being framed as ‘emergency measures’ and a matter of ‘exceptional circumstances’; these approaches remained in-line with the vague tenets of neoliberal theory and therefore could claim to be reasonable and rational measures on behalf of a legitimate authority. Whilst emphasising competition as a social organisation that does not require centralised organisation by the state (which is always assumed to have authoritarian tendencies) neoliberalism asserts that the state’s role is nevertheless to support such ‘free competition’, meaning that the post-crash measures to insert liquidity into the market were true to this role. Put differently, so long as (something called) ‘the market’ is taken as the source of legitimate authority, it is argued that it can protect against the ‘necessarily oppressive’ nature of (something called) ‘the state’. The role of the state therefore becomes technocratic: providing support for capitalism – such as a legal framework that guarantees private property rights and a material infrastructure including railways, roads and internet cables – in order to allow individuals to exercise liberty through the market.

This therefore leads us to the second side of neoliberalism as a set of hegemonic cultural norms. Because the neoliberal state is only perceived to act with legitimacy insofar as it takes on market principles in its own organisation – promoting values of competition and market-led efficiency (hence the privatisation and outsourcing

of state assets and responsibilities) – this suggests a wider neoliberal ‘common sense’ as a set of values that have become deeply entrenched in contemporary society. As such, this is “a form of governance that seeks to inject market principles of competition into all aspects of society and culture” (Gane 2014:1) by encouraging values towards this end (such as efficiency, measurement and enterprise). Furthermore, whilst it may seem strange to argue that neoliberalism is so widespread when so few people appear to connect these principles under one doctrine (or explicitly identify themselves as ‘neoliberal’), it is argued that this is actually *evidence* for its normativity, in that the apparent ‘post-ideological’ nature of these ideals are a sure sign of neoliberalism being an ‘ideology par excellence’ (Žižek 2008a:xiv).

In the century leading up to the crisis, it seems that neoliberalism had become so hegemonic that even the greatest economic crash since 1929 and ‘The Great Depression’ – as well as the greatest disparity in economic distribution since the First World War – was unable to sway such principles from being considered *the* measure of rational governance, legitimate authority and reasonable social organisation. For instance, consider the popularity around the idea that – despite the economic crash – an individual’s economic failure was considered to be ‘their own fault’ whilst extreme wealth accumulated by the very wealthy was ‘well-deserved’ (perhaps best encapsulated by the Conservative Party’s resurrection of the ‘deserving poor’ idea in the ‘shirkers vs. strivers’ trope). Such a widespread view reflects this neoliberal culture by making folk devils out of ‘shirkers’ who are imagined to be the opposite of “the ‘ideal’ neoliberal subject; a self-regulating, motivated, flexible worker who participates in the (educational, social and



economic) opportunities provided” (Lambert 2009:297), with such ideas being perpetuated by ‘poverty porn’ like *Benefits Street* (Tyler 2015) or *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (Hill 2015). Detested and abjected for being lazy or taking advantage of the hard work of others, these discourses not only insinuate that it was the greed of the ‘deserving poor’ (rather than the ‘deserving rich’) which somehow created the financial crisis, but also demonstrates how neoliberalism refuses to recognise collective or social (structural) causes of such problems and instead emphasises the ‘individual’ as its unit of analysis. Indeed, as Hayek famously put it, neoliberals see the ‘social’ as a “weasel-word par excellence” (Peck 2010:58).

In sum, neoliberalism is both a socio-economic doctrine *and* set of cultural norms which asserts that competition between individuals is the best way to organise society, because this is meant to protect individual freedom from the ‘necessarily’ oppressive tendencies of the state. It therefore creates a culture that emphasises principles of: individualism (or anti-collectivism and libertarian cynicism towards the state); competitive flexibility (or precarity and insecurity); efficiency and measurement (or surveillance); as well as privatisation and outsourcing (or democratic unaccountability). What’s more, it seems that these principles have become ‘normative’ and “hegemonic as a mode of discourse... incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey 2005:3) and subsequently, when the credit crunch happened as a result of excessive risk creation in the finance industry, governments in neoliberal countries nevertheless felt legitimised to re-emphasise these norms in order to back a rescue mission. Whatever the (public) cost, failing market interests needed to be saved, prices needed to be guaranteed, and the principles of competition reasserted.

This far-reaching ‘common sense’ nature of neoliberalism, however, is also the reason why it was unclear what the financial crisis meant in terms of an opportunity for social change. On the one hand, as I mentioned at the beginning, many activists and theorists saw the financial crisis as a window of *opportunity* for a radically alternative politics to become popular in the context of an apparent crisis in neoliberal legitimacy. For example, whilst admitting that “little had apparently changed” (2014:16), it remains Gamble’s contention that the financial crisis was (and continues to be) a unique juncture in which “radically different outcomes were at stake” (2014:29). In other words, for Gamble, it seems that “as the crisis has unfolded, it has also begun to cause an upheaval in previously settled views of the world: in our assumptions and expectations” (2014:27), suggesting a unique opportunity for resistance against neoliberal ‘common sense’ and the possibility for an alternative to take its place.

However, on the other hand and as I have argued above, neoliberalism also appeared to *remain* the predominant model of ‘reasonable governance’ that has guided decisions in how best to approach the crisis, suggesting not only that there exists no viable alternative, but that there is even a *foreclosure of imagination* over the very *possibility* of a viable alternative. Or as Mirowski writes, for instance, it seems that “unaccountably the political right had emerged from the tumult stronger, unapologetic and even less restrained in its rapacity and credulity than prior to the crash” (2013:1-2), suggesting that rather than ‘collapse’, neoliberalism was instead somehow able to occupy the ground of the ‘least worse’ option (see Badiou 2002). Neoliberal capitalism might have failed, but it had been able to ‘fail forwards’ in a zombie-like manner in which “manifest inadequacies have – so far

anyway – repeatedly animated further rounds of neoliberal interventions” (Peck 2010:6). In other words, rather than sparking a search for radical alternatives, the neoliberal equation with common sense meant it was seen as the only ‘sensible’ model available, suggesting that “the most likely reason the doctrine that precipitated the crisis has evaded responsibility and the renunciation indefinitely postponed is that neoliberalism as worldview has sunk its roots deep into everyday life, almost to the point of passing as the ‘ideology of no ideology’” (Mirowski 2013:28).

As such, the financial crisis has not, so far, led to radical social change, and instead we find ourselves in a society of persisting and unprecedented inequality and with the continuing concentration of capital into the hands of the richest 1%. Or as Andrew Sayer despairs:

“...the rich continue to get richer, even in the worst crisis for 80 years – they can still laugh all the way to their banks and tax havens as the little people bail out banks that have failed... Generally, the less you had to do with the crisis, the bigger the sacrifices – relative to your income – you have had to make... Meanwhile a political class increasingly dominated by the rich continue to support their interests and diverts the public’s attention by stigmatising and punishing those on welfare benefits and low incomes, cheered on by media overwhelmingly controlled by the super-rich.” (2015:1)

After a brief post-crash loss, the richest 1% are now richer (in proportion to the other 99%) than at any other time in history. The UK, for example, may have counted 53 billionaires in 2010, but this number has almost doubled since then to 104, suggesting that that Occupy movement were quite accurate to highlight “the growing split between the top 1% and the 99% and the dominance of politics by the 1%” (Sayer 2015:3) who are, so far, “having a good crisis” (2015:179). Despite a threatened crisis of legitimation, therefore, the wealthiest 1% “have recently shown

themselves to be the most able group at ensuring their incomes continue to rise in defiance of the economic crisis” (Dorling 2014:14), using the opportunity to buy assets cheaply, lobby government, and continue to create new methods of wealth extraction and accumulation. Practices of risk creation therefore remain largely unregulated *despite* their direct role in the crash, including: speculation using borrowed money (through hedging and leverage); market manipulation and insider trading; tax havens, tax avoidance and technocratic trade deals (such as TTIP); as well as the value-skimming by an entire sector of intermediaries (such as accountants and lawyers) who outnumber CEOs (see Sayer 2015 for an overview of these practices).

Against arguments that the financial crisis indicated (or continues to indicate) some sort of unique opportunity for political possibility and radical change, it therefore seems instead that Žižek was correct to comment at the time that “any naïve leftist explanation that the current financial and economic crisis necessarily opens up a space for the radical left is... without doubt dangerously short-sighted” (2009:17). As a logic which underpins and legitimises the state-support of capitalism, neoliberalism has been able to reassert itself because it is so “embedded in the very ontology of our everyday lives” that “even those groups that are potentially able to challenge its legitimacy cannot do it without challenging their very existence” (Lilley & Papadopoulos 2014:972). It is therefore my aim to understand why this is the case and why post-crash movements – in particular Occupy (in) London – were ultimately unable to capitalise upon the crisis.

It is the contention of this thesis that *it was precisely the deeply sunk 'ideology of no ideology' status of neoliberalism which created a problem for the possibilities of post-crash resistance and their desire for an alternative model of politics, economics and society*. Indeed, as Mirowski goes on to argue in his diagnosis of a 'crisis gone to waste', this cultural dominance seemed to have direct adverse effect on post-crash movements, because:

“...the neoliberal worldview has become embedded in contemporary culture to such an extent that when well-meaning activists sought to call attention to the slow-motion train-wreck of the world economic system, they came to their encampments with no solid conception of what they might need to know to make their indictments stick; nor did they have any clear perspective on what their opponents knew or believed about markets and politics, not to mention what the markets themselves knew about their attempts at resistance.” (2013:328-9)

What Mirowski suggests, then, is that post-crash resistance was somewhat *foreclosed* by the normativity of neoliberalism. Referring specifically to Occupy Wall Street in this passage, he then argues that their confusion of 'openness with democracy'; their libertarian preoccupation of being hijacked by existing political organisations; and their emphasis on self-expression, denied the movement a solid conception and a clear perspective, problematically rendering them “more cultural than political” (Mirowski 2013:328).

However, whilst I agree with this argument and aim to expand on similar ideas throughout this thesis, I nevertheless intend to do so in a much more constructive manner than taking such a dismissive (and, quite frankly, condescending) tone. As well as offering a critique of post-crash resistance, therefore, I also intend to search for the potentialities and possibilities which can be learnt from the Occupy movement as it existed in London. For me, Occupy 'knew' what it was doing more

than Mirowski is willing to give them credit for despite facing a number of problems in attempting to resist the hold of neoliberal hegemony. What's more, rather than simply dismissing the movement outright, I also intend to demonstrate how we can only really understand the strange survival of neoliberalism and lack of social change after the crisis, by looking closely at the limitations and challenges faced by those who attempted to resist it and bring that change about.

Those overseeing the crisis in neoliberal countries made a series of decisions which directly diminished the quality of life and prospects for the vast majority of people, whilst explicitly benefitting the minority (1%) and coolly responding "to calls for a radical overhaul of their management by calling them unviable and unrealistic" (Worth 2013:49). Yet, it is my contention here that this demonstrates the hegemonic status of neoliberalism as underpinning legitimate authority, rather than a departure from its doctrine. Therefore, if activists and theorists are going to continue to argue that crises are opportunities for radical change, then we also need to understand how neoliberalism was not only able to survive the crisis, but actually seize "the opportunity to push down wages, dismantle the welfare state, allow corporations to dictate policy and push up profits still more" (Sayer 2015:342). It is argued that the continuing hold of neoliberalism over political possibility meant that post-crash resistance was ultimately foreclosed by this context and unable to bring about radical social change.

## Occupy in London

Rising unemployment (particularly amongst the young and over-qualified) as well as cuts to public services (either as policy or as ideologically-driven stipulations on international loans) began to have serious effects in a number of nations during the aftermath of the crash. What's more, the perceived double-standards of such a situation (that the poor would effectively pay for the recklessness of the rich) – as well as the democratic deficit of policies that attempted to justify measures that *sustained* extreme inequality *without* a mandate from the people to do so – were grievances *central* to the increase in resistance, protest and social movement organisation which happened next. In Europe, anti-cuts organisations not only appeared in the hardest hit countries (derogatorily known as the 'PIIGS' or Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain), but also elsewhere, such as the English student protests of November 2010 against the trebling of tuition fees (leading to the iconic Milbank protests where students literally kicked in the windows of the Conservative Party headquarters).

However, it was only when the Arab Spring happened that the 'age of resistance' seemed to start in earnest. In Tunisia, the global recession had not only made a tough economic situation worse, but had further highlighted the democratic deficit of the government and its agents and on the 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010 – reportedly in protest of the corruption and harassment he had experienced at the hand of such officials – Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire and died in a Tunisian market. This was the act which many see as igniting the revolutions which came next. Spreading across social media and the Arabic news network *Al Jazeera*, this was followed by

further self-immolations in Egypt in January and anti-governmental protests in Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Mauritania (leading to the eventual revolutionary overthrow of the governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen). However, whilst on the one hand this was seen by western politicians and mainstream media to be a desire for ‘American-style democracy’; others – including many activist networks – instead interpreted these events as reacting to similar plights as their own: being unable to control or influence the government’s agenda; persisting inequality and injustice; as well as a lack of employment opportunity. Indeed, for those who experienced the Arab Spring first hand, the connection to the movements which followed was clear, in that this was the start “of a revolution caused by the near collapse of the free-market, combined with an upswing in technical innovation, a surge in desire for individual freedom and a change in human consciousness about what freedom means” (Mason 2012:3).

In the European summer of resistance which followed in 2011, it was therefore perhaps un-surprising to see re-workings of a classic May ’68 slogan (‘we are all German Jews’) into expressions of solidarity with the Arab Spring, such as ‘we are all Bouazizi’ or ‘we are all Tahir Square’ (the central square of Tunis where the protests took place). Connections were quickly being made between the movements in North Africa and organisations in Spain and Greece, utilising social media in order to express common grievances and echo sentiments across national and cultural borders. After the crash, the so-called ‘PIIGS’ (like Bouazizi) had also found themselves on the receiving end of government corruption and humiliation as successive bailouts from international funding agencies (the EU, the IMF and the



World Bank, collectively referred to as 'the troika') came with neoliberal conditions that forced governments to cut public spending *regardless* of the democratic will of the people. As such, it seemed that the market and the state had more control over people's lives than they did, with whispered promises that austerity would eventually improve conditions on the ground slowly proving false. European activists – who broadly referred to themselves as the 'indignados' (the indignant ones) and the 'agnaktismanoi' (the outraged) – therefore mimicked the urban occupations in Cairo and Tunis by setting up camps in Madrid, Barcelona and Athens from 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011 (hence why the movement became known as '15-M'), suggesting that "ours is an age of resistance" where "the possibility of radical change has been firmly placed on the historical agenda" (Douzinas 2013:9).

Following the 'Arab Spring' and the 'European Summer' there then came the 'American Fall'. Attributed by many to the Canadian magazine *Adbusters*, the story goes that "it was an exchange that [editors] White and Lasn had in early June 2011 that produced the idea to camp out, the actual name of the movement: Occupy Wall Street, and the start date: September 17<sup>th</sup>" (Kaneck 2012:12) with Lasn registering the domain name 'occupywallstreet.org' on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2011 and sending an email to the magazines subscribers stating that 'America needs its own Tahir'. But it could just as easily be argued that it was the pre-existing activist networks who actually organised and enacted 'Occupy Wall Street' that autumn, drawing on connections made (like *Adbusters*) in the alter-globalisation movement of the late nineties (including Seattle 1999) but also at the 2003 march against war in Iraq (widely recognised as the largest international march in history) as well as various environmental, climate, anti-poverty and economic protests (such as against the

G8) in the years in-between. Beyond simply being started by an advert in a magazine, we should therefore recognise a number of post-crash movements which pre-existed Occupy Wall Street and yet directly fed into it, such as the attempt by Anonymous to occupy Washington in June or (most importantly for our discussion) the online campaign of 'we are the 99%' (where people shared selfies holding up placards detailing their post-crash debt or lack of employment and educational prospects, ending with the common tagline 'I/we are the 99%').

What's more, of course, Occupy Wall Street was directly inspired by the events in North Africa and Southern Europe and, in particular, this was demonstrated by their adoption of the tactic of occupying urban spaces which were seen to be central to their grievances. For the first camp, this space was Zuccotti Park: a few blocks away from Wall Street, the home of the American Stock Exchange and a central node in the international financial system. As the symbolic home of free-market capitalism, Wall Street represented those brokers, executives, politicians, economists and intermediaries who, despite their self-professed expertise, had made the economy crash. By occupying that space, the aim was therefore to register their discontent that those responsible appeared to be not only to be emerging unscathed from the crisis, but positively *bankrolled* by the public purse (whilst public services took major cuts) and using that money to maintain the lifestyle they were accustomed to (including extortionate annual bonuses). Or, as Žižek put it when he spoke at Zuccotti Park, it may be that Occupy Wall Street was being dismissed as a 'socialist movement', "but here there is always socialism for the rich" (2011a:67) and Occupy Wall Street therefore had brought together people who wanted "to restore government to citizen control, to regulate finance for the common good, and to get

banks out of the business of buying legislators and influencing law” (Taylor & Cessan 2011:4).

What is truly exceptional about Occupy, however, was the way in which it soon “erupted around the world in a synchronised fashion and used similar symbols and narratives... [while] the actual protests were sustained by quite different local networks in different cities” (Uitermark & Nicholls 2012:1). By one count, there were soon 1518 different Occupy camps established in 70 different countries (Occupy Directory 2015) including – one month after Wall Street – in London. While the original intention of the London movement was to set up a protest camp in Paternoster Square (home of the London Stock Exchange) on the 17<sup>th</sup> October 2011 – mimicking the tactic of occupying symbolic spaces which represented the movement’s grievances – they were subsequently pushed back from the gates of Paternoster by police and fences. However, after being kettled onto the steps of St Paul’s cathedral next door, ‘Occupy London Stock Exchange’ (LSX) decided to set up camp there and remained until February 2012.

In that time, Occupy LSX at St Paul’s remained the focus of much national and international media attention, yet a number of other camps, squats and groups were also established throughout the city, including: the Bank of Ideas (a squat in an empty bank which held events and talks); Occupation Finsbury Square (initially a ‘relief’ camp for the over-crowding at St Paul’s); Occupy Leyton Marsh (a local community-led occupation which attempted to protest construction work for the 2012 Olympic games); and Occupy Nomads (who, when I met them, had set up camp at Mile End). In addition to these spaces, however, Occupy (in) London also

included a number of working groups who focused on specific issues, including Democracy Action (DAWG); Energy, Equity and Environment (EEE); Economics (EWG); The New Putney Debates; Press/Social Media; The Occupied Times; and the controversial Occupation Records. Some of these groups chose to meet away from the campsites and one site in particular – perhaps reflecting the Quaker origins of some of the movement’s adopted process (such as consensus decision making and leaderless meetings) – was the Friend’s House in Euston.

It could easily be argued that these occupations were all that the movement aimed to achieve, in that they sought to experiment with and perform – or *prefigure* – an alternative model of society using decision-making models meant to establish a horizontal and inclusive democratic process. The mechanisms which Occupy adopted were all geared towards this end, such as: the General Assembly (known as the ‘GA’) where *anyone within or without the movement* was (in theory) welcome to contribute and speak; consensus decision-making where *everyone* had to agree in order for a motion to be passed or ‘blocking’ where an individual or group could prevent the passing of a motion; as well as an array of unique ‘hand-signals’ to stop interruption but allow interjection. However, it soon became apparent that *despite* these measures, hierarchies, divisions, fractures and cliques were appearing within the movement, beginning from within the GA itself, but becoming further exasperated after the eviction of St Paul’s (whose decision *not* to re-occupy divided the movement over the importance of occupying space).

As I will show in chapter 4, this split had serious implications for certain base requirements of organisation, symbolic consistency and extension of the

movement, as well as creating un-checked structures and hierarchies within the (supposedly) horizontal space. On the one hand, as the ex-LSX activists distanced themselves from the remaining sites, they began to appropriate the universal (media-designated) name of 'Occupy London' for their own *particular* activities (consolidating this co-optation through bank account access; press releases; invite-only organising committees; as well as registered domain names, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts). Whilst, on the other hand, the perceived problems at Finsbury Square which fuelled such distancing (i.e. violence, alcoholism, drug use, homelessness, disorganisation, hedonism and dirt) were, if anything, *exasperated* by this division, as the ex-LSX contingent withheld money which had been ostensibly donated at St Paul's for (something called) 'Occupy London'. Because the new post-camp St Paul's group had monopolised the symbolic and material resources of the movement and attempted to cut-off Finsbury Square, this left the remaining occupiers little choice but to try and maintain the site by themselves. As such, whilst the name and appearance of 'Occupy London' was monopolised by the ex-LSX contingent, it was a title bitterly denied by those at Finsbury Square and therefore, in order to reflect this contention, I will be using the moniker 'Occupy (in) London' to refer to the diverse city-wide movement as a whole.

It was this divisive situation that I walked into when I first visited Finsbury Square in May 2012 and introduced myself as a researcher. Over the following week, I began to experience life at the campsite and learn about how the movement viewed their resistance; how they understood the powers they were up against; why they saw occupation as important; as well as what challenges and struggles they were facing.

Furthermore, I also found out where I could meet and contact other individuals and

groups within the movement and my research began to snowball as I met more and more activists over the next three years. In addition, I also kept up with the movement's literature, online activity and mailing lists, as well as attending a number of one-off protest events which had been organised in association with 'Occupy London'.

In order to keep track of the conversations I was having with activists, as well as allow an accurate reflection back on what they had to say later, I decided to obtain consent in order to record the conversations I had with those I met. As such, in the summers of 2012, 2013 and 2014, I collected a total of 42 interviews with 36 activists (with repeated interviews taking place in separate years). These were unstructured interviews, by which I mean informal conversations where "interviewers simply have a list of topics which they want the respondent to talk about, but are free to phrase the question as they wish, ask them in any order that seems sensible at the time, and even join in by discussing what they think of the topic themselves", a method which I found to be "like other qualitative methods... valuable for discovery" (Fielding & Thomas 2008:247). The list of topics evolved over the course of the research, but were largely informed by theories of political foreclosure (which I outline in the next chapter). Having said that, I also allowed tangents to develop and new themes to emerge which often led me to re-think my position on the theory, or led me towards *new* theory, before the next round of fieldwork. As such, this became very much an iterative process but, perhaps unusually, it was one in which the people I was interviewing often had just as much knowledge of the theory I was using as I did, or were even able to point me in the direction of theorists I had not even considered. The 'interviews' therefore

sometimes took the form of a debate or discussion over political theory and philosophy – and their application or irrelevance in understanding Occupy (in) London – rather than a straightforwardly one-way understanding of the movement from me as an observer.

On the other hand, however, a number of limitations in this approach also became clear. Whilst this confidence with the theory meant that the activists did not seem to be ‘self-censoring’ their answers too much, other interview effects became noticeable, including, in particular, a certain feeling of *distrust*. As I will show in chapter 6, there was a certain level of cynicism and conspiracy theory within the movement which made some wary that I might be a potential undercover police officer, an agent of the Illuminati, or someone who – by doing research for a university – simply didn’t get the *point* of the movement<sup>2</sup>. In addition, this effect was probably not helped by my use of a voice recorder, which may have disconcerted some “respondents who become self-conscious or alarmed at the prospect of their words being preserved” (Bryman 2008:452). But in the majority of instances, however, I seemed to be able to win trust and convince the people I met of my intentions (particularly by demonstrating my sympathy for the movement’s politics) leading many to give me the benefit of the doubt.

All interviews in this thesis have been anonymised and replaced with a number in the format of their year followed by the interview number (e.g. ‘2013:1’). I hope that the coding style I have used allows readers to compare across quotes if they

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<sup>2</sup> As one activist put it to me: ‘you bullshit the public and you become a sociologist or something, when you can bullshit other sociologists: that’s when you become the best in your field... that’s when they believe your bullshit.’ (2012:7)

wish. I have also sought to preserve gendered pronouns where possible in order to indicate something of the person who is speaking (which, as I will show in chapter 4, is important for understanding some of the structures which persisted within the movement). During the fieldwork, I also made an active effort to speak to less white, male activists, as I began to realise that this group was beginning to be over-represented. While this was not particularly easy in a movement which (as I will show later) suffered from structural inequalities – especially towards the end – I was largely successful in trying to address this imbalance, with only a slim majority of the activists I interviewed being male (57%) with white men making up the biggest demographic (52%).

My approach to this research was to be open and honest about my theoretical approach and views on the movement, which in-itself was an epistemological stance that I chose in order to reflect the politics of the movement itself. As Prentoulis and Thommassen have argued, social movement researchers should endeavour to “treat the protestors as political theorists rather than as objects of social reality... the aim is to let the protestors speak for themselves, and to treat their language as the language in which our analysis is cast” adding “this is at once necessary and impossible” (2013:169). ‘Necessary’ in order to create a iterative dialogue with the movement and learn from those involved without too much shaping of their answers; ‘impossible’ because such interactions will inevitably be shaped and interpreted by the researcher, who will emphasise certain themes over others. As such, while I aimed to avoid treating the activists as ‘objects’ which “would be to silence them just at the point when they are trying to make their voices heard” (Prentoulis & Thommassen 2013:169); it must also be recognised that



“the reader will not get the authentic and unmediated truth about the protestors, as if such a thing existed in the first place” (2013:171). Indeed, while the activist quotes used below have attempted to capture and include as many viewpoints as possible, the complexity of the Occupy movement – even just focusing on London – means that some points will inevitably be under-emphasised, over-generalised or even self-contradicting.

Subsequently, I must emphasise that *this thesis should not be read as a scientific attempt to capture the empirical ‘truth’ of Occupy (in) London*, but instead should be understood as *an explicitly political argument on the limits of the movement after the crisis, informed iteratively by theory and the activists themselves*. I therefore suggest that my work could be read as a *genealogical* analysis or an attempt to discern the foreclosures of the movement by its context of reasserted neoliberalism. In other words, my aim was to take an approach that “neither prescribes political positions nor specifies desirable futures... rather, it aims to make *visible* why particular positions and visions of the future occur to us, and especially to reveal when and where those positions work *in the same register of ‘political rationality’ as that which they purport to criticise*” (Brown 2001:109-10 *emphasis added*). I will return to the idea of genealogical politics in the next chapter.

My methodology has also been inspired by the ‘live methods’ of Back and Puwar (2012) amongst others, who argue that social researchers should be “working *with* rather than *on* participants” (Sinha & Back 2013:10) by allowing them to “shift the analytical terms of reference” (Sinha & Back 2013:10). Indeed, as mentioned above, a number of ‘shifts’ in my research came about through mutual discussion over

social and philosophical theories of resistance, leading me towards additional themes that arose through the course of the fieldwork. I therefore intend to make the activist's voices and critique heard using the language which they used to understand the politics of the financial crisis (such as 'the 1%'), whilst remaining reflexive on the unrealised potentials and debilitating limitations that their resistance faced as a whole.

However, this was an approach that was not made particularly easy by certain institutional constraints. For example, while the compulsory blanket anonymization of participants in social research is a requirement of university ethics committees, this meant that I had to 'censor' or 'cover-up' the activists I met at the same time as they were trying to be seen and heard. In other words, I found this "anxious symptom of ethical hypochondria" actually limited "opportunities to rethink authorship and innovate new formats for research" (Sinha & Back 2013:2). Not that I would argue for blanket transparency (clearly, in some research, anonymization is necessary to protect sensitive participants), but for many of the activists I met, they complained that their purpose was actually to be seen and heard; *not* to be anonymised through my research. What's more, while the ethics committee is meant as a 'double-check' on social research which protects the researcher, the researched and the reputation of both discipline and university; it is nevertheless one which does not necessarily lead to better 'ethics'. Indeed, it could be argued that the ethics committee achieves very little ethically, because such considerations "increasingly transform from a genuine social and internal dialogue, in which we ask searching questions and make crucial decisions about our research... into a box-ticking administrative task in which we are forced to engage by our employers and

peers” (Winlow & Hall 2012a:411). Indeed, the very approval by an ethics committee might well have unintentional effects by interpassively relieving the researcher of continual reflection, in that – once approved – the researcher “can forget about the ethics and get on with the real work” (Winlow & Hall 2012a:411).

Therefore, whilst C. Wright Mills alerts sociologists towards the pitfalls of both ‘grand theory’ and ‘abstract empiricism’ – arguing in terms of the former that “there is... no one universal scheme in terms of which we can understand the unity of social structure, no one answer to the tired old problem of social order” (1981:46-7) and, in terms of the latter, that there is a “tendency to confuse whatever is to be studied with the set of methods suggested for its study” (1981:51) – I nevertheless wish to argue that at least *theory* has ethical and political questions and reflections built in, whilst *abstract empiricism* continues to risk ignoring how “any statement of fact is of political and moral significance” (1981:178). Indeed, this is a problem which I will pick up on again when I discuss social movement theory in the next section.

My emphasis on social theory in this research should also be recognised as particularly useful in times of crisis and uncertainty – where things appear to be happening ‘too fast’ to allow for a meaningful and sustained reflection – by providing us with a much needed opportunity to ‘slow down’ (Gane 2006). Indeed, as Žižek has argued, there is “a fundamentally anti-theoretical edge” to the injunction that there is simply “no time to reflect on all of it, we have to act now” (2008b:xv). As such, whilst the argument against such slow and sustained reflection might be that ‘we need to do *something*’ and avoid ‘doing nothing’; it is Žižek’s

contention on the contrary that “one should gather the courage to answer: ‘yes, precisely that!’... there are situations where the only truly ‘practical’ thing to do is to resist the temptation to engage immediately, and to ‘wait and see’ by means of a patient critical analysis” (Žižek 2008b:xv).

I therefore argue that my focus on theory in order to understand Occupy (in) London and post-crash resistance – as well as the conducting of my fieldwork over a period of three years – gave both myself and the activists I met time to reflect and critically assess the movement *beyond* the initial excitement and flurry of 2011-12. This is in contrast with much social movement theory which instead conducted fieldwork in the spur of the moment, leading to either overly dismissive or overly romantic conclusions on the movement’s potential. Against the speed of the financial crisis and its reactions, it was therefore my aim to use fieldwork *and* theory in order to perform a constructive and measured critique of Occupy (in) London. By repeating my research over a number of years, including multiple interviews with some of the activists, I therefore consider this work to be in a unique position in avoiding short sharp characterisations offered elsewhere, instead allowing us to be more reflective and critical of the movement over time. This offered rich and interesting insights into the limits, struggles and challenges Occupy (in) London was facing, giving time to take stock and reflect critically on this resistance without being caught up in the romanticism or cynicism of the post-crash moment.

## On social movement theory

The most common sociological approach to understanding and conceptualising activism can be grouped under the title ‘social movement theory’ (SMT) which includes a wide-range of methods, models and approaches as part of a rich and diverse sub-discipline. The mainstream approach taken by SMT is to identify themes across social movements in order to break them up into elements of understanding – including theories around resource mobilisation, the rationality of crowd behaviour, styles of organisation or process, cultural symbolism, emotions or identity – and, for Goodwin and Jasper, this is an approach that has wide implications:

“Scholars of social movements ask why and how people do things they do, especially *why* they do things *together*: this is also the question that drives sociology in general, especially social theory... if we can see why people will voluntarily cooperate in social movements, we can understand why they cooperate in general... it gets to the heart of human motivation.” (2015:4)

This definition in particular also suggests certain scientific aspirations of SMT to identify universal truths and create knowledge of human behaviour via the study of social movements as a phenomenon in particular. The ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of motivation behind human actions, they argue, can be learnt through the study of social movements, allowing us to ‘justify’ their study and render their activism ‘useful’ for scholarly endeavour.

In this section, however, I will offer a critique of SMT and, through doing so, begin to outline my own position on a number of key arguments which are raised throughout the thesis. While it is not my intention to completely dismiss SMT as an arena of research which has provided some well-formulated and insightful

observations (some of which, as my reference list demonstrates, I have used below to discuss Occupy (in) London); I nevertheless argue that there are a number of limitations that persist in the mainstream approach taken by SMT and it is those which I intend to address in turn, including: a problematic presupposition of what 'politics' is; overlooking the complicities of new social movement theory; a tendency to fetishize resistance as something which can take place 'outside' of wider power relations; the contradictions of the 'activist-academic' position; and finally, a rather underwhelming reaction towards the 2011 mobilisations, which took three different forms (analytical; cynical and romanticised).

Firstly then, I argue that there is a tendency within SMT to use the word 'politics' or refer to the 'political' *as if there was no fundamental contention over what 'counts' as politics*. For instance, when Della Porta and Diani write that, when thinking about social movements "the role of organisations that are not directly political is particularly worth mentioning" (2006:4), they nevertheless do not provide a definition or discussion over what they mean by 'not directly political' here. The problem with this, I suggest, is that we need ask what it *does* when authorities draw a 'self-evident' line between what is 'political' and what is 'non-political'. For instance, when Tarrow writes that "as participation was channelled into organisations, the movement, or part of them, took a more political logic – engaging in implicit bargaining with authority" (1994:168 in Della Porta & Diani 2006:189); or when we come across sentences in SMT such as "social movements are instrumental in the politicization of identities" (Taylor 2013:49), I argue that we need to re-examine presuppositions of what counts as 'political logic' and what

mechanisms and structures of normative distribution may be covered up by this 'common sense' over what is meant by 'politicization'.

In contrast, we need to problematise what 'politics' is and refer instead to the *designation of what counts* as 'politics' in order to understand the distribution of power in society. Following Rancière in the next chapter, I argue that power is ultimately that which designates, partitions and distributes the 'sensible' (for example, what 'counts' as 'political'); whereas 'politics' itself should be used only to describe instances that actually challenge and disrupt that distribution. Therefore, while debates around what politics is are certainly not absent in SMT, the term is too often being used uncritically and without clarifications of what the author means by the designation of something as 'political' (and the related insinuation of what is not 'political'). Furthermore, this lack of reflection is not only problematic because it gives the term 'politics' a conservative function, but is also particularly awkward in an era where social movements are precisely attempting to *contest* the boundaries of what counts as politics (a sentiment best captured by slogans such as: '*this* is what democracy looks like' which aims to directly contest common sense notions of what 'democracy' is).

This problem can be further demonstrated by a second critique of new social movement (NSM) theory. The 'new' here is meant to refer (roughly) to movements which came about in the late 1960s and sought to distance themselves from 'old' leftist politics (such as parties and unions) by making a break with the "century of great ideologies" (Della Porta Diani 2006:97). As such, NSMs reflect the post-modern 'incredulity toward meta-narratives' (Lyotard 1984), positioning

themselves against “the intrusion of the state and the market into social life, reclaiming individual’s rights to define their identities and to determine their private and affective lives against the omnipresent and comprehensive manipulation of the system” (Della Porta and Diani 2006:9). On the one hand, NSMs were therefore crucial for bringing to the fore politics that were precluded by monolithic, hierarchical, worker-centric reductions of the Left – such as “women’s rights, gender relations, environmental protection, ethnicity and migration, peace and international solidarity” (Della Porta & Diani 2006:vii) – yet, on the other hand, the emphasis on values of individual identity which pre-emptively criticise collective identities as ‘oppressive’ *also* meant that NSMs represented a distinctly *individualised* and *libertarian* approach to understanding politics. As such, NSM *theory* (by over-emphasising these values) risks overlooking how such individualism and libertarianism suggests a certain extension of wider logics into their resistance.

Whilst some scholars and activists of these ‘new social movements’ *do* reflect on such limitations (for instance, Butler 2006), NSM theorists have tended to misrecognise this potential problem of complicity by only going so far as to say that individualism presents *pragmatic* organisational issues (such as making collective organisation and decision-making infinitely difficult). While this is, I argue, a genuine problem (and one which I revisit later on), this critique does not go far enough in reflecting on the *potential foreclosure* of resistance *by those very structures they are seeking to challenge*. In fact, there might be said to be a general unwillingness in SMT to even entertain the idea that resistance and power might actually be structurally *intertwined*, with many theorists instead opting for a more romanticised notion of resistance as always ‘outside’ of that which is being



protested against. This can be shown, for example, by the widespread idea that movements have the ability to constitute ‘temporary autonomous zones’ (Bey 2011) or ‘free spaces’ (Staggenborg 2013) which can somehow exist *outside* of predominant power structures and are controlled entirely autonomously by activists themselves<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, however, I will argue that this polar framing of power and resistance ultimately has the effect of *preventing any critical reflection on the complicities that movements might have with those structures they seek to overcome*.

While this is a central theme and repeats throughout the thesis, suffice here to argue that myths of ‘immaculate conception’ (Taylor 1989) and the idea that resistance is always something ‘authentic’ before being ‘co-opted’ (Frank 1997) may well do more to *limit* political possibilities of resistance than open them up to reflexive understandings of power and resistance. Rather than seeing resistance as something to be found ‘outside’ of power in some ‘interstitial space’ (Wright 2010) from which to launch authentic protests and make grievances known, I therefore put forward an approach in the next chapter which aims to think about some of the ways in which activism might *counter-intuitively* sustain and extend those social distributions that they aim to resist and change. In other words, I argue that it is fundamentally flawed – and potentially counteractive – to view a social movement as “an alternative ‘local rationality’... from its immediate context” which “constitutes an alternative way of operating not only to hegemonic ‘common sense’

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<sup>3</sup> Stemming from Habermas’ (1987) concepts of the ‘lifeworld’ or the ‘public sphere’ as a pure and authentic space positioned against those who are perceived to be in power (and who wish to co-opt it).

but also the expert-led knowledge” (Cox 2014:965). Instead, it is my contention that movements like Occupy (in) London *must* reflect on the presuppositions they share with wider social norms, in order to prevent any debilitating foreclosure by them.

This problem can be further demonstrated by SMT itself, in that such ‘hegemonic common sense’ and ‘expert-led knowledge’ which Cox tries to avoid, appear to remain something with which theorists are complicit with *despite* the popular trend at the moment to celebrate the idea of the ‘activist-academic’. While situated in wider sociological conversations than SMT – such as Buroway’s (2005) call for a ‘public sociology’ or Sinha and Back’s (2013) call to make methods ‘more sociable’ – I nevertheless want to raise a concern with the particular way in which these identities are being embodied and performed in academic practice. Indeed, rather than the intention of such titles to create an opportunity for a more reflexive position on authority and expertise, it seems that the self-identification as ‘activist-academic’ can also act counter-intuitively as a distancing manoeuvre from the activist-*non*-academic. It raises the question why a theorist can’t simply be an ‘activist’ without adding the caveat to the end and why an academic should need to assert this last piece of information if not to reassert their power and authority *in the same breath as they supposedly seek to undermine it*. Rather than breaking out of the ‘ivory tower’, such a title risks rebuilding it out of glass, in that it maintains the self-professed authority of the researcher who sees themselves as able to provide “guidance, judgement or witness from the position of ‘knowing better’” (Blencowe 2013:15), reasserting their status at the same time as they (apparently) try to deny it. What’s more, the signifier ‘activist-academic’ seems to be being utilised as a form of social capital, as an indicator of authority and authenticity of an

academic's research at social movement conferences and events, rather than the reflexively ethical and political epistemological position it was meant to be.

We can also find this apparent denial of authority in the tendency towards 'abstract empiricism' within SMT in order to scientifically 'describe' social movements by rote-learning theories and models which can then be compared with case studies.

As has been pointed out by others within the sub-discipline itself, such an "uncritical repetition of a reductionist account" is problematic because it seems to bear "no resemblance to the social theories and processes of movement theorizing we encounter *within* movements" (Cox & Flesher-Fominaya 2013:8 *emphasis added*). We therefore need to ask what the *political* use is of such an empiricism which aims to create elaborate models, concepts and descriptions, based upon the authoritative knowledge and perceptions of the expert social movement theorist. Not that descriptive work has no place, of course, but surely it only has one which is reflexive upon its own presuppositions and power and does not see this descriptive practice as the end point of analysis.

Indeed, it is my contention that this descriptive tendency of social science is something that has become even more problematic in the post-crash context. At a time when resistances were springing up all over the globe, challenging long-standing claims of political apathy in contemporary society, many (though not all) social movement theorists appeared to only react scientifically by defining and categorising these events. Indeed, this is an approach which has been reflected in the literature published since then, and suggests that there were at least three dominant reactions to post-crash resistance by SMT: (1) an *analytical* reaction ('do

these movements fit into our pre-determined categories?'); (2) a *cynical* reaction ('this is not an effective resistance, there is nothing to see here'); and (3) a *romantic* reaction ('this is it, this is the movement we have been waiting for').

The first reaction is demonstrated most clearly by a question which was raised at the Manchester Activism Conference in 2013: 'does Occupy even *count* as a social movement?' Such an approach suggests an attempt to understand these uprisings using previously established models and theories, attempting to get the most accurate scientific descriptions and categorisations possible, but at the same time misrecognising how this question itself comes from a position of authority and potential symbolic violence. What such a question *does*, I suggest, is presuppose what *would* count as a 'legitimate' social movement and act of resistance, whilst ignoring the implications of this designation. For example, when Gledhill (2012) describes a project by the British Museum to archive Occupy London, he argues that "the curator's a priori decision to collect material from Occupy imbued it with important social historical status that could be interpreted by both participants and critics alike as a source of political legitimacy" (2012:344). Such a suggestion, however, overlooks how the movement was precisely an attempt to *challenge* the idea that institutions (like the City of London sponsored British Museum or academic sociology) were even required to designate political legitimacy; yet for Gledhill, what made Occupy 'count' as a movement, was precisely its categorisation as 'important' by such authority.

The second reaction to Occupy which is related to this problem can be seen in the more cynical criticism brought to the movement by those who concluded that they

were ‘not proper’ resistance or ‘not a proper’ movement. To clarify, while my own critique may be misinterpreted in this way, it is my intention to provide a critical (genealogical) reflection on the limitations of post-crash resistance which is potentially useful for the future (rather than provide a cynical reading of Occupy that might have the effect of marginalising or side-lining the importance or legitimacy of their resistance). In other words, my approach is meant not only to avoid the position of expert-authority as much as possible, but also to avoid a cynical positioning of the movement as ‘not as good’ as fetishized movements in the past or the future.

While I will return to the related problem of melancholia in the concluding chapter, suffice here to point to some of the cynical descriptions of Occupy. A common criticism along these lines, for example, was to characterise the movement as young, naïve, middle-class graduates with no future, who had “played by the rules and were now being punished for it” (Benski et al 2013:548). However, while there were certainly people within the movement who matched such a characterisation, I found that they were certainly not in a majority and definitely did not represent the grievances of the movement as a whole. Such dismissals of the movement, therefore, only acted to depict their activism as made up of facetious kids who did not know how to ‘resist properly’ and were simply there to ‘have a good time’ (or, as one theorist put it at the International Sociological Conference in 2014, Occupy Tel Aviv was basically ‘the Jewish Woodstock’). Even the more ‘generous’ classifications of the post-crash organisations as ‘new new social movements’ or a “young movement that will mature” (Langman 2013:524) seemed to play into these cynical dismissive classifications which, rather than support the movement, instead

offer a kind of cynical analysis that only served to further marginalise their appearance.

Finally, a third reaction – which can be understood as the opposite of such cynicism – was that of a fetishized romanticism towards post-crash movements which often involved an un-critical and un-reflexive celebration of activism (often even more positive and generous than the activists even thought of themselves!) In particular, we can see this romanticism in a number of loose comparisons with past events of activist myth and legend, such as arguments that Occupy was “much like the Paris commune, a truly autonomous democratic community” (Benski et al 2013:550) that was “reclaiming public space and transforming it into a ‘public sphere’” (Benski et al 2013:552-3). Not only does this once again rely on the presupposition that such an ‘outside’ space is even possible, but it also precludes a reflexive analysis of the way in which power can foreclose and limit resistance through such comparisons that fetishise the movement and overlook its potential problems. As such, whilst I make a number of comparisons between Occupy (in) London and May ’68 (or ‘the sixties counter-culture’ in general) below, these should therefore not be read as a romanticised analysis, but instead as an instrumental comparison in order to discern the foreclosures of the movement.

In sum, whilst I certainly agree that “analysing Occupy is important for understanding both the political importance of social movements and the theoretical limits of social movement approaches” (Pickerill & Krinsky 2012:280), we nevertheless need to bring out the complexities of this statement. *Who* is doing the analysing and *how*? What are their *presuppositions* of what does and does not

‘count’ as important politics or legitimate resistance? What *limits* do their categorisations and designations *have on* these social movements? It is therefore my aim to adopt a position *between* the analytical, cynical and romantic, towards a critical theory which allows us the reflexive edge needed to understand the limits of post-crash resistance (whilst avoiding either cynical dismissals of the movement *or* romantic fetishisation). Furthermore, it is my contention that the theory which I outline in the next chapter – one from which I both began and returned to as part of an iterative process – offers a radically *alternative* approach to understanding post-crash resistance than that offered by mainstream social movement theory.

## Thesis outline and recurring themes

In chapter 2 – ‘What is our one demand?’ Resistance and the foreclosure of political possibility – I will establish the key concepts and frameworks that will inform my critique throughout the rest of the thesis through a literature review that addresses the question of the foreclosure of political possibility in contemporary society. We begin with a brief comparison between Occupy (in) London and May ’68 as well as discussing Rancière’s split with his teacher (Louis Althusser). This comparison is not meant to be romantic, however, but instead aims to demonstrate the relevance of Rancière’s ideas on May ’68 to understanding Occupy. After introducing Rancière’s unique model of politics, power and resistance through the idea of the ‘distribution of the sensible’, I then seek to stretch this concept in order to make links with other theories around these issues. In particular, I go on to discuss the ‘art of distribution’ from Foucault, as well as constructively building on Butler and Žižek’s critique of

Foucault's theory of power. The final section then outlines the idea of 'genealogical politics' (as that which is able to interrogate the limits of possibility) but also the idea of 'post-politics' (as that which has foreclosed the possibility of such a politics). By the end of this chapter, I therefore hope to have justified the main arguments of this thesis:

- 1) That power operates through a 'distribution of the sensible' as an aesthetic and normative limit on legitimate (and illegitimate) appearances.
- 2) That power and resistance are (potentially problematically) intertwined by this common distribution, suggesting the risk of foreclosure by presupposed structures.
- 3) That a politics which could disrupt that distribution is *also* distributed as 'non-sense' and 'impossible' in contemporary society.

The third chapter – 'Whose Streets?' Occupy in space – then begins to bring in my fieldwork in order to look specifically at the Occupy movement in London and at their use of public space as a tactic. Utilising Lefebvre *and* Situationist theory, I suggest that there might be a problematic foreclosure through the former's idea of 'the festival' which is potentially overcome by the latter's idea of 'détournement'. I then look specifically at the movement itself, arguing that St Paul's cathedral can be shown to have had a number of contextual characteristics that made their resistance *potentially* effective by not only fulfilling practical requirements of organisation (longevity, publicity and performance), but also symbolic needs (such as the morality symbolised by the cathedral and the City of London). It is my contention therefore that the occupation of space *does* have radical political



potential in contesting the distribution of the sensible and I go on to solidify this argument by demonstrating the limitations of *online* space against its celebration as a forum for democracy and resistance. Against cyber-utopian thinkers like Castells, I use criticism from Morozov, Dean, Žižek and Occupy activists themselves to find the limits of the internet and social media as a platform for radical social change.

As may have become clear by now, I have entitled each chapter using a slogan from the movement, and in chapter 4 – ‘We are the 99%’ On collectivity, universality and prefiguration – I turn to *the* central slogan of Occupy. It is my contention that ‘we are the 99%’ indicated radical *intent* as an expression of both collectivity (‘we’) and universality (if we understand ‘the 99%’ as an assertion of universal democratic equality beyond the movement itself). However, after making an argument for the importance of these two characteristics, I then go on to argue that Occupy (in) London remained unable to fulfil the potential of this slogan, due to presuppositions of individualism, libertarianism and prefiguration. Beginning with the former two, I argue that the collective ‘we’ was foreclosed by prevailing concerns with individual liberty and a libertarian distrust of solidarity or formal organisation, preventing collectivity, symbolic consistency and qualitative extension. Then moving onto the idea of prefiguration, I argue that this entailed a fetishisation of openness and outside-ness that actually had a counter-intuitive effect in preventing a necessary reflection on preclusions and distributions of power within the movement. I therefore argue that, while exclusion is necessary (as part of a universal-collective identity) for radical politics, this must *not* be based on *precluding* ‘those who should be included’ and instead such boundaries of appearance must be open to negotiation.

In chapter 5 – ‘This is what democracy looks like’ Pursuing authenticity – I then look at these problems from a slightly different angle, by arguing that the rise of (what Boltanski and Chiapello call) ‘the new spirit of capitalism’ *at the same time* as the 1960’s counter-cultural movements was not coincidental. Instead, it is argued that both seek to address critiques of capitalism as stultifying and inauthentic by positing the pursuit of authenticity (i.e. a space ‘outside’ or at least ‘at a distance’ from capitalism) as desirable and necessary for an effective critique. Counter-intuitively, therefore, it is argued that insofar as we find a concern with the pursuit of authenticity within Occupy, we also find a foreclosure by the logic of ‘cultural capitalism’ and a problematic extension of market values into their resistance. This also leads me onto a discussion of distributions of power within the movement, suggesting that the concern with authenticity lent itself to inadvertent problems with authority and preclusion, as some activists considered themselves to be more ‘experienced’, ‘authentic’ or ‘pure’ than others.

The penultimate chapter – entitled ‘Meet the 1%’ Conspiracy theory and cynicism – then asks how conspiracy theory and cynicism within contemporary activism might problematically limit the political possibilities of resistance because of the way in which such discourses *frame* power and its relation to resistance. We begin with a theoretical discussion, looking at the concept of cynicism as ‘enlightened false consciousness’ (an idea taken from Sloterdijk and Žižek) as well as ‘conspiracy theory’ itself (in the work of Birchall and Dean). Against the latter’s (albeit cautious) defence of conspiracy theory, it is my contention that it is actually *problematic* for movements to frame their resistance (and the power which they are resisting) in this way, because they maintain their marginalised position, as well as extending

libertarian norms and creating distrust between activists. Using the same argument, however, I then go further by also positioning myself against those who dismiss conspiracy theorists, by demonstrating how this is just as much a foreclosure as conspiracy theory itself.

I will conclude by arguing that movements need to recognise and accept their *complicity* with presupposed structures whilst avoiding a *foreclosure* of possibility by them. I will also reassert the need to recognise the potential of occupation and asserting collectivity and universality, as well as the importance of reflecting upon complicity with wider structures and norms. I then finish by outlining the problem of melancholia before making an argument for Žižek's notion of 'the art of the impossible' and proposing that the aim of any radical resistance should be to *make nonsense appear against its designation as such*.

For the sake of clarity, I will now briefly outline some of the recurring themes of the thesis which appear throughout:

- 'Structures' = I use this term in order to talk about power as a normative and culturally hegemonic common sense which is extended and reiterated by everyday presuppositions. Power is therefore understood as a coercive and constitutive force which works through (what Rancière calls) a 'distribution' or 'designation' of the sensible that *constitutes* the legitimacy or illegitimacy of appearances (rather than solely a 'top-down', negative, oppressive force).
- 'Foreclosure of possibility' = I take this phrase from Dean's definition of 'post-politics' (outlined in the next chapter) which reflects one of the central

arguments of the thesis: that there was a foreclosure of possibility in the post-crash moment which pre-empted and limited the possibilities and horizons of resistance and change in implicit and structural ways.

- 'Presuppositions' = one of the ways I seek to demonstrate the foreclosure of possibility is by arguing that resistance is not 'outside' of prevailing power structures in some 'authentic' space; but actually appeals to the *same* distributions of what is considered 'rational', 'sensible' and 'logical' – what is deemed to 'count' as 'legitimate', 'authentic' and 'reasonable' and what is not – within pre-existing frameworks of society. Acting within these structures extends and reiterates them as norms and is therefore potentially problematic when wanting to challenge or change them.
  
- 'Prefigurative' = because of such complicity, the widely held contention (in social movement theory and movements alike) is that resistance should aim to adopt a position 'outside' of power from which it can 'prefigure' (i.e. perform and enact) a future alternative. However, as I will show, this *disallows a necessary reflexive critique* in addressing of problems of preclusion and power distribution within the movement (along lines of authority, patriarchy, class, race etc.), because these are considered to 'not be a problem' in such a utopian structureless space.

## 2. 'What is our one demand?'

### Resistance and the foreclosure of political possibility

"We tend to believe... that there is little we can change – singly, severally, or altogether – in the way the affairs of the world are running or being run, and we believe too that, were we able to make a change, it would be futile, even unreasonable, to put our heads together to think of a different world from the one there is and to flex our muscles to bring it about if we consider it better than the one we are in."

Zygmunt Bauman (1999:1)

Before the crisis, it was common for social theorists to argue that politics was in poor shape in contemporary society. Whilst the running of 'world affairs' seemed permanently out of reach and unchangeable, the problem also seemed to be widespread apathy and a lack of belief or imagination that a different world was even possible. As such, change was considered three times limited for those wanting to bring it about: unable to flex muscles, spark imagination, or organise collectively with one another. Instead, there seemed to be a prevailing sense of futility in the face of such power, going beyond any pragmatic challenges faced by activists (such as resource mobilisation, movement recruitment or media image) and instead suggesting something much more problematic: *that we had lost the very idea and possibility that there could even be an alternative society to the one we are currently in.*

It is the aim of this thesis to provide an account of such a foreclosure of political possibility which has taken on a renewed significance in the post-crash context and the reassertion of neoliberalism as a hegemonic common sense. While this "normative order of reason" (Brown 2015:9) was certainly shaken by the financial crash, it was nevertheless quickly reasserted as the only 'reasonable' model that

could be used to guide decisions during the subsequent crisis. Rather than a critical reflection upon the premises and promises of neoliberalism, therefore, the state instead perceived its only legitimate role as ‘getting business back to normal as soon as possible’, suggesting a situation in which “there will [only] be success or failure... success or failure, rather than legitimacy or illegitimacy, now become the criteria of governmental action” (Foucault 2008:16). Although the economic crisis was caused by the risk-making practices of global finance, the legitimacy of the model that encouraged these practices was never truly put into question, but instead only framed as a regrettable ‘failure’ in an otherwise common sense approach to the state and the market. After the stocks hit bottom and the dust had settled, it therefore became steadily clear (through bailouts, austerity measures and quantitative easing) that neoliberal rationality would be continuing “by default” (Winlow et al 2015:2).

Post-crash neoliberalism is therefore a peculiar doctrine that systematically failed and yet has been un-compelled to defend its legitimacy as a socio-economic model. Instead, its hegemonic hold on the contemporary political imagination denied even the *possibility* of an alternative altogether by dismissing the very idea as ‘non-sense’. Indeed, appealing to the logic of TINA (‘there is no alternative’), neoliberal logic remained firm in its post-historical claim of having emerged victorious from the great ideological experiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in representing “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the final form of human government and as such the end of history” (Fukuyama 1992:xi). It was therefore never a question of whether neoliberal capitalism had become illegitimate after the crash, because this had actually become *the measure* of legitimate governance. As such,

“far from the end of capitalism, the bank bail-outs were a massive reassertion of the capitalist realist insistence that there is no alternative” (Fisher 2009:78), continuing to guide and frame ‘world affairs’ *despite* the increase in political mobilisation and resistance against it.

In this chapter, I will establish the main concepts and ideas which form the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis in attempting to answer why the resurgence of insurgence after the financial crash was unable to bring about radical change.

This includes three parts: (1) the idea that power is ultimately a normative policing that can operate through aesthetics, or what Rancière calls ‘the distribution of the sensible’; (2) the notion that power and resistance are structurally intertwined by this common distribution, meaning that there is (potentially problematically) no outside to power; and (3) the contention that ‘politics’ (understood as a contestation and disruption of the distribution of the sensible) is ultimately being foreclosed and prevented by this distribution (or what has been referred to as a situation of ‘post-politics’). Beginning with Rancière, I draw a number of instructive parallels between May ’68 and the Occupy movement in order to demonstrate what I believe to be the relevance of Rancière’s theory for the latter. This then leads into a discussion around the distribution of the sensible as a way to understand power as a normative and aesthetic limitation, which I then broaden in the second section through the work of Foucault, Butler and Žižek. This discussion also aims to problematize the relationship between power and resistance, demonstrating the structural complicity they both share in the distribution of the sensible, which suggests that radical resistance might be foreclosed by its intertwining with that it seeks to mobilise against. In the final section, I then

reaffirm this argument through a brief discussion of that politics which is arguably being prevented by such a foreclosure, as well as a critique of ‘post-politics’ as an attempt to understand this limitation of political possibility.

## **The distribution of the sensible**

A number of useful parallels that can be made between the Occupy movement and the infamous events of May 1968 in France could help us understand the former using theory that has derived from the latter. For instance, both examples of activism are comparable in their emphasis on the political possibilities of urban space, which is a theme that can be attributed specifically to the Situationists of post-war France (who are alleged to have been a direct influence on May ’68, see chapter 3). Furthermore, both movements can be shown as characterised by ‘counter-cultural’ preoccupations with the authenticity of their resistance, which emerged at the same time as a ‘new spirit of capitalism’ in the post-war period (something which, as I will argue in chapter 5, is not coincidental). In this section, however, I will be focusing on another similarity between them, in that both May ’68 and Occupy expressed a libertarian anxiety and preoccupation with the authority of formal political organisation, seeking to resist such an organisational strategy that relied on hierarchical expertise in order to distribute the legitimacy of their appearance. I therefore argue that Rancière’s sympathy for May ’68 and their politics suggests that his unique theory of power as a ‘distribution of the sensible’ – which emerged from this context – is useful for framing our understanding of political possibility and the Occupy movement.



For May '68, the institution which embodied this concern was the French Communist Party (PCF) who had positioned themselves as uniquely able to recognise legitimate and authentic politics on the Left. In particular, this was an attitude personified by the high-profile public intellectuals involved in the party, including Rancière's teacher – Louis Althusser – whose 'scientific socialism' was widely accredited as having found the 'truth' of Marxism (as well as rescuing the reputation of the Left from Khrushchev's horrific revelations of Stalinist Russia). As an expert, Althusser was regarded by many as holding authority in the party and uniquely able to "think Marx in his historical context to allow us to implement Marxism in ours" (Rancière 2011:11). Yet this position came directly under contention when May '68 – as the "largest mass movement in French history, the biggest strike in the history of the French workers' movement, and the only 'general' insurrection the over-developed world has known since World War II" (Ross 2002:4) – took place *without* the leadership of the PCF. Indeed, one of the main aims of the protestors of May '68 was precisely "to contend the domain of the expert [and] to disrupt the naturalised sphere of competences (especially the sphere of specialised politics)" (Ross 2002:6), meaning that the PCF and Althusser – with their claims to political expertise, authority and leadership – were a key target of their grievances. The striking students and workers of May '68 aimed, on the contrary, to make themselves visible without the need for recognition or organisation by the party.

The reaction of the PCF to these uprisings, however, were to disregard them as a 'middle class' movement in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of their appearance. Indeed, this dismissal of May '68 by the party is precisely what

compelled Rancière to break with Althusser and withdraw his contribution to *Reading Capital* (2009) in protest. While Althusser had positioned himself as an authority in designating what counted as ‘legitimate’ politics; Rancière argued that his very “condemnation of the student uprisings as a petit-bourgeois movement” (2011:xiv) revealed a fundamental contradiction in his position. By undermining the protest, the PCF appeared to be suggesting that “the masses make history, certainly, but not the masses in general, only the ones that we instruct and organise” indicating that they saw history as something which can “only be known or ‘made’ through the mediation of intellectuals” (Rancière 2011:11). By adopting the position that only *they* had the authority to grant the legitimacy of resistance, Althusser and the PCF therefore refused to recognise the biggest uprising in post-war French history and instead added their voice to a denial of the activists’ legitimacy.

Furthermore, Rancière argued that this problematic authority was deepened by Althusser’s publication of his well-known text *Lenin and Philosophy* (1971) three years after May ’68 and including the widely-read essay on ‘ideological state apparatus’. In the essay, Althusser argues that power should be thought of as existing *materially* in institutions such as “the school (but also other state institutions like the church or other apparatus like the army)” because these organisations embody “know-how but in the forms that ensure subjections to the ruling ideology of the mastery of its ‘practice’” (Althusser 1971:128). In other words, Althusser argues that power can be understood as operating through knowledge, as well as the designation of what does or does not count as legitimate ‘practice’ (thereby ensuring the legitimacy of state power by maintaining an

ideological hold on such a designation of legitimacy). However, while Rancière does not disagree with this argument, he nevertheless points out that not only was this *precisely* the critique raised *against* Althusser and the PCF by May '68, but that it once again demonstrated the hypocrisy of Althusser's position, in that the text suggested he had discovered "in the course of his research something that the actions of the masses had already amply demonstrated, but which he advances as a vary daring hypothesis" (Rancière 2011:32). In other words, both Althusser's initial designation of May '68 as illegitimate *and* his subsequent attempt to legitimise their critique by incorporating it into his own theory, suggested to Rancière that power ultimately operated *through* such designations of legitimacy, or what he calls: 'the distribution of the sensible'.

In the first instance, the distribution of the sensible should be understood as a distribution that *identifies appearances*, or as Rancière himself defines it, "a specific regime for identifying and reflecting... a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships" (Rancière 2004:10). As such, this concept is meant to indicate an *aesthetic* structure of visibility and articulation, which distributes some appearances as legitimate and others as illegitimate, acting as a policed order (i.e. a set of co-ordinates, contours, frameworks and limits) that is continually being reasserted whenever there is an appeal to something as 'sensible' or 'non-sensible' appearance. Or as Rancière explains:

"It consists, before all else, in *recalling the obviousness* of what there is, or rather of what there is not and its slogan is: '*Move along! There's nothing to see here!*' The police is that which says that here, on this street, there's nothing to see and so nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the

space for circulating is nothing but the space of circulation.” (Rancière 2010:37 *emphasis added*)

Through ‘recalling the obviousness’, Rancière suggests that the distribution of the sensible appeals to *contextual norms* of what should or should not be seen, done or named within a given space. As such, in the second instance, the distribution of the sensible should be understood as a *normative policing* of aesthetics, able to either ‘move along’ illegitimate appearances or designate them as ‘nothing to see here’ (i.e. non-sense). Like Althusser and the PCF’s designation of May ’68, therefore, this is an order that operates through the denial of legitimacy on behalf of an authority that is uniquely able to recognise the legitimate and illegitimate (the sensible and non-sensible) within a given space and context.

It is for this reason that the distribution of the sensible is a useful concept not only for understanding the PCF’s denial of May ’68, but also for understanding Occupy (in) London as a movement who (through occupation) attempted to create an aesthetic appearance in the context of (reasserted) post-crash neoliberal hegemony. I argue that we can therefore use Rancière’s ideas to think about the ways in which this movement was foreclosed by such a policing of the sensible, but that in order to do this effectively, we need to take quite a broad reading of what is meant by ‘sensible’. I suggest that playing on the ambiguity of the word in English can bring out the subtleties and implications of Rancière’s theory, by treating ‘sensible’ as both an aesthetic value judgement *and* the related distinction between the ‘rational-sensible’ and the ‘irrational-nonsensible’. In other words, I intend to use the distribution of the *sensible* to mean, at the same time, a material policing of what may or may not appear in a space, as well as the related recognition that this

is a designation of the rationality and reason of that appearance. This allows us to recognise that such a distribution must rely on a presupposition of what is 'reasonable' and 'rational' (or 'obvious') in the first place, designating appearances as legitimate (sensible) and illegitimate (non-sensible) off the back of that distribution. The distribution of the sensible is therefore both a distribution of who may (or may not) appear to the *senses* and who may (or may not) *sensibly* – that is 'legitimately' – appear.

Before I move onto expanding the concept even further, however, it may be useful to provide a number of brief illustrations of the implications of thinking about power in this manner, by looking at a concern that many Occupy (in) London activists expressed in term of their distribution by dominant discourses (in particular from mainstream media and politicians):

*How do you think the public view Occupy?*

"To quote Boris Johnson: 'a hemp-smoking, fornicating hippie!'" (2012:5)

"We just got hounded really with that Boris Johnson quote: 'Occupy are like snowflakes; you must not let them settle!' And each time we just got... they just pounded us." (2014:2)

"It might have been presented that way, because if you get *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Evening Standard* sending a journalist down to St Paul's or something and they want to run a story about it... They're going to get a photograph of the person they think is the most-strangest looking person." (2014:4)

"Yeah, I mean it's more photogenic to photograph people like yourself or me, who have dreads, than it would be to photograph [someone 'normal'] who does a lot in Occupy. So the media is responsible for perpetuating those stereotypes and from the beginning was good at asserting... *maybe a cultural or politically engineered attempt to marginalise the movement*, with the visual representations and the lies basically..." (2014:9)

Playing into a certain aesthetic sensationalism by carefully choosing which people they used to (mis)represent the movement suggests an attempt to distribute

Occupy as ‘nothing to see here’ or ‘non-sense’ by playing into stereotypes that stem from a history of attempted dismissal of the Left: portraying the movement as ‘hemp-smoking fornicating hippies’ with ‘dreadlocks’ who must not be allowed to ‘settle’. But it also suggests a recalling of obviousness by implying a set of related norms of what, in contrast, might be said to legitimately appear in that space (e.g. city workers).

This distribution of Occupy (in) London can be further demonstrated by the great lengths that the right-wing newspaper *The Daily Mail* (2011) went to in order to undermine the legitimacy of the movement’s appearance. Using thermal imaging equipment, journalists Tom Kelly and Damien Gayle reported that 90% of the tents were apparently vacant at night, concluding from “the damning images” that “the vast majority of the demonstrators who gather around the cathedral to denounce capitalism during the day go home or to a hotel to stay warm at night”. In Rancière’s language, we can perhaps understand this as a direct attempt to (literally) designate Occupy as ‘nothing to see here’ and as something which should be moved along as an illegitimate appearance.

There were also prevailing concerns within Occupy (in) London that the signifiers they were adopting to identify their appearance might give off ‘the wrong impression’ and lead to a dismissal of the movement:

“And there was some people that said: ‘well I’m personally *anti-capitalist*, but I don’t want this movement to be known as that, because people...’ I mean, I suppose it’s like the term ‘anarchist’. When the term gets used by the *mainstream media*, that means that as an *insult*, but they don’t really know what it means. They’re not using it in a way that... well, for what I understand is anarchism.” (2013:6)

“There’s a misconception that [Occupy] is full of anarchists, hard-core anarchists and crusties with dreads... when in reality, the majority of those people who supported Occupy and were in the working groups *are just regular people*. Maybe they never went on a demo before, but they saw that, were inspired, they went down and were like: ‘yeah, this is beautiful’.” (2013:11)

In wanting to avoid being dismissed, the activists therefore felt restricted as to which politics they could use to identify the movement, as this would risk associating their appearance with categories seen as ‘non-sense’. Instead of being seen as ‘crusties with dreads’, there was therefore an aesthetic concern that they should be seen as ‘just regular people’ (rather than risk being distributed as ‘nothing to see here’ by dominant discourses like the mainstream media).

In this section, I have attempted to demonstrate the application of Rancière’s theory of ‘the distribution of the sensible’ for Occupy (in) London through a brief discussion of the concept’s formative context of May ‘68. Although his theory emerged out of this particular moment and his criticism of Althusser, the common grievances of May ‘68 and Occupy – such as their designation by authorities (like the PCF or *The Daily Mail*) who seek to dismiss them – means that the ‘distribution of the sensible’ is a useful concept for understanding the way in which power can operate both aesthetically and normatively. As such, while I don’t want to overstate a connection between the two, I nevertheless argue that May ‘68 and their grievance with the dominance of the PCF in French politics was similar to the way in which Occupy emerged in the context of the post-crash dominance of neoliberal ideas and policies.

## Power as ‘the art of distribution’

In addition to playing on the word ‘sensible’ (as both aesthetic and normative) in order to bring out the nuances of Rancière’s theory, I also suggest that we need to stretch the meaning of the word ‘distribution’ in order to fully grasp the way in which this power operates. As has been pointed out by Oliver Davis, the original French concept of *le partage du sensible* does not straightforwardly translate into the *distribution* of the sensible in English, because *partage* derives “from the verb *partager*, meaning both to share out and divide up” and therefore “evokes simultaneously the sharing-out and dividing-up of the sensory” (2010:91). More than a ‘distribution’ then, this suggests that we also need to understand Rancière’s theory as indicating a ‘positive’ power that actually *constitutes* – that is, partitions, divides and categorises – the legitimacy (and illegitimacy) of appearances. In other words, this is a power that should not simply be understood as something which solely suppresses (or ‘moves along’) illegitimate appearances; but also something which actually polices and coerces appearances by *rendering them* sensible or non-sensible in the first place (i.e. labelling them as ‘something legitimate’ or as ‘nothing to see here’).

As such, a more structural definition of power as something non-centralised, dispersed, capillary, normative and hegemonic, helps us to expand our reading of the distribution of the sensible, and I intend to do this by drawing on resemblances between Rancière and another French theorist from the same era: Michel Foucault. In this section, through a discussion of Foucault who (like Rancière) puts forward a theory of power as something structural, positive and constitutive, I also aim to put



forward the notion that power and resistance are not necessarily the contentious opposites that they first appear to be, but instead might be understood as (potentially problematically) intertwined with one another due to their common distribution. In other words, by meeting with Foucault's ideas (as well as critique bought towards him by Butler and Žižek), it is my intention here to outline the idea that resistance can be seen as *complicit* with this structural power, which raises questions of its potential *foreclosure* by that complicity.

In a phrase which seems to fit nicely with Rancière's language, Foucault even describes power as an 'art of distribution' where "in the first instance, discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space" (1991:141). In other words, for both theorists, power is seen to operate by:

"...organising 'cells', 'places' and 'ranks', the disciplines create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical... it is *spaces* that provide fixed positions and *permit circulation*: they carve out individual segments and establish operational links; they *mark places and indicate values*; they guarantee the obedience of individuals, but also a better economy of time and gesture... they are mixed spaces: real because they govern the disposition of building, rooms, furniture, but also ideal, because they are projected over this arrangement of characterisations, assessments, hierarchies." (Foucault 1991:148 *emphasis added*)

Whether it is Althusser and the PCF; Boris Johnson; *The Daily Mail*; riot police or a sociologist, what both Rancière and Foucault seem to be arguing is that power operates through a presupposed distribution of individuals within space which disciplines their appearance through a "specification of place" (Foucault 1991:141) or an "elementary location and partitioning... each individual has his place; and each place its individual" (Foucault 1991:13). Through this, appearances can

therefore be policed via architecture, characterisations and assessments that appeal to a presupposed distribution of value.

In contrast to, say, a cynical or conspiracy-based theory of power (see chapter 6), Foucault therefore contends that, while power might *seem* to be something that is ‘possessed’ by those at the ‘top’ – the ‘powers that be’ or institutions with ‘power invested in them’ – this appearance is actually an *effect* of wider structural distributions. As such, power is not something that solely operates negatively and ‘top-down’, but in a more productive manner by structurally *producing* that authority and legitimacy. Or as he puts it:

“Power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of *censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression*... if on the contrary power is strong, this is because, as we are beginning to realise, *it produces effects at the level of desire – and also at the level of knowledge*. Far from preventing knowledge, *power produces it*.” (Foucault 1980:59)

More than simply censoring, excluding or repressing appearances, power operates most effectively as a positive force that actually *produces* the legitimate or illegitimate appearance. We can therefore understand power as precisely that from which the legitimacy of an appearance follows, granting aesthetic sensible-ness and nonsensible-ness through a presupposed context. Subjects of power are therefore not controlled simply through their ignorance of power’s truth (as in ‘false consciousness’); but instead – in a more *Žižekian* (or Lacanian) understanding of ideology – are precisely produced as meaningful, desiring and knowing subjects *by* the distribution of the sensible. In this sense, power as an art of distribution is that which limits norms, attitudes, values, desire, knowledge, *legitimacy* and *possibility* in everyday life.

Foucault goes even further, however, when he controversially concludes that – because subjects to power are actually being *produced* by these structures and hierarchies – power is therefore all-encompassing and that “there is no outside” (1991:301) to its distribution. This seems to present a number of potential problems for resistance, because if this power is universal, then it must *include* that which is attempting to challenge it and therefore is something that can be “manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated” (Foucault 1991:141). In contrast to a number of social movement theorists who (as I demonstrated in the last chapter) maintain that resistance can establish autonomous prefigurative spaces ‘outside’ of power; Foucault’s theory is instead one that seeks to complicate the relationship between power and resistance by suggesting that they are mutually intertwined and structurally complicit with one another.

Indeed, as Foucault infamously states in *The History of Sexuality*, “where there is power, there is resistance” adding “and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power” (1998:95). Elaborating further in a later interview, he then clarifies that this phrase is actually something of a tautology once we understand power as a structural art of distribution, because he is “simply saying: as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance... we are never trapped by power, we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy” (1989:153). In other words, Foucault seems to be suggesting that despite the complicity of resistance and power, this does not necessarily mean that there is simply no chance for radical change or that that resistance is completely trapped and *foreclosed* by such a distribution, writing

that “to say one can never be ‘outside’ power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what” (1980:142). In other words, an activist or movement might be structurally complicit with that which they are attempting to resist against, but this does not necessarily mean they are inevitably condemned to failure or limitation by that complicity. What this *does* mean, however, is that we need to carefully think through this relationship in ways which do not fetishise resistance as ‘outside’ of power, but instead seek to *trace where the potential foreclosures are* in that complicity.

Paradoxically then, resistance may be contradicted by its inevitable complicity with that power it is resisting against, but this does not mean that there is no opportunity to overcome that foreclosure. This contradiction is not only at the heart of Foucault’s work, however, but has also been well outlined by others. Butler, for instance, begins by suggesting that the complicity of resistance to structures of power can indeed create forecloses of the possibility of that resistance, writing that even when “we think we have found a point of opposition to domination” we “then realise that we have unwittingly enforced the power of domination through our participation in its opposition” (Butler 2000:28). However, on the other hand, if there is ‘no outside’ to power then it becomes necessary to think of how resistance can be *complicit yet un-foreclosed* by this concomitant relationship. As such, Butler goes on to argue that “if subversion is possible, it will be subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and *spawns unexpected permutations of itself*” (Butler 2006:17 *emphasis added*). Whilst recognising the all-encompassing nature of the distribution of the sensible, therefore, Butler offers a way to think

about resistance as complicit yet not necessarily foreclosed, advocating a politics that reflects upon its limitations in order to create unforeseen possibilities and ‘spawn unexpected permutations of itself’. In other words, this is not simply an oppositional relationship between power and resistance, but – to use Rancière’s language – a *re-figuring* of categories which designate appearances in the first place. Highlighting the contingency and non-permanence of such a ‘common sense’ distribution of the sensible, therefore, it is Butler’s contention that unexpected appearances and possibilities can emerge (we will return to this in chapter 4).

On the other hand, however, others continue to argue that Foucault’s theory of power without an outside is simply too restrictive to allow for radical possibility or political and social change. Žižek, for instance, begins his critique of Foucault and Butler by agreeing that “power and resistance are effectively caught in a deadly mutual embrace: there is no power without resistance (in order to function, power needs an x which eludes its grasp); there is no resistance without power (power is already formative of that very kernel on behalf of which the oppressed subject resists the hold of power)” concluding that “resistances to power are *generated by the very matrix they seem to oppose*” (2008d:298 *emphasis added*). This seems at first to be an understanding of ideology that is similar to Foucault’s understanding of power, in that it is seen to be the common basis for the very production of desire and knowledge that renders resistance and power as structurally constitutive. Yet Žižek nevertheless goes on to criticise Foucault for ignoring “the dialectical path which would allow him to break out of the vicious cycle of power and resistance by positing resistance as an effect which can outgrow its cause and overturn it”

suggesting that “Foucault remains uncomfortably trapped within this cycle” (Armstrong 2008:20)<sup>4</sup>.

It is my contention, however, that Foucault might in fact offer us a way out of this apparent foreclosure, and that this is demonstrated by Butler’s emphasis on his attempt to challenge the presuppositions of possibility and impossibility through a *genealogical* analysis. Such an approach, which aims to demonstrate the contingency of those ‘givens’ that distribute the sensible, holds the potential to radically return to disavowed and denied possibilities that have been dismissed by that distribution as ‘non-sense’. As such, even though resistance is complicit with power as a mode of appearance, this does not mean that it is necessarily foreclosed by it, because (as Žižek himself argues) there is always “the possibility of an effect escaping, outgrowing its cause, so that although it emerges as a form of resistance to power and is as such absolutely inherent to it, it can outgrow and explode it” (2008d:303). Indeed, as I will argue next, a genealogical politics holds precisely this radical potential to break out of that limited distribution of what is and is not ‘sensible’, by demonstrating the non-permanence of this (apparently permanent) criteria of legitimacy.

In this section, I have sought to outline a common concern for Foucault, Butler and Žižek, in that all three seek to understand how radical resistance can possibly emerge when the very condition of that possibility is a presupposition of prevailing power structures. As a resistance that emerged in the context of neoliberalism as a

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<sup>4</sup> It is Armstrong’s (2008) contention that Foucault overcomes this entrapment in his later writings on the ‘self’ where he seeks to posit the subject as autonomous and self-constituting *without* a reliance on wider distributions. I argue, however, that we do not need to go so far to meet with Žižek’s critique.

post-crash distribution of the sensible, their theory subsequently suggests a need to understand how Occupy's resistance dealt with this complicity and how they were prevented from 'outgrowing and exploding it'. In other words, we need to ask in what ways Occupy's complicity with post-crash neoliberalism as a hegemonic mode of appearance led to a foreclosure of their possibility to resist it, rather than a re-figuring of that distribution from within. By thinking resistance and power as intertwined, I therefore intend to get to some of the contradictory and un-addressed limitations of movements like Occupy to bring about radical change, in that they may have (unintentionally) re-established and extended neoliberal capitalism as 'common sense' *despite* their resistance towards it.

## **The foreclosure of possibility**

So far, then, I have presented a model of power which acts materially (aesthetically) and normatively (through appeals to 'obviousness') to limit appearances by designating them as sensible or non-sensible ('nothing to see here; move along'). I then further developed this model in order to demonstrate the potentially problematic complicity of resistance with this structural power, as that presupposition upon which an appearance is considered legitimate or illegitimate. This leaves us, however, with a final question: what *is* the 'politics' which is being prevented by such a distribution? In this section, I will outline a theory of genealogical politics as that which is being foreclosed by this distribution of the sensible, before offering a critique of the concept of 'post-politics' which aims to describe this foreclosure.

In contrast to the distribution of the sensible, Rancière offers a definition of politics which is much more radical than its common use in everyday discourse, arguing that:

“Politics... consists in transforming the space of ‘moving along’, of circulation, into a *space for the appearance of the subject*: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in *re-figuring* the space, that is what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it. It is the instituting of *a dispute over the distribution of the sensible*.” (Rancière 2010:37 *emphasis added*)

As such, Rancière’s politics includes more than simply the mechanisms of government or citizenship: it is a radical dispute over the very presuppositions of what is ‘sensible’ by re-figuring (or ‘détourning’, see chapter 3) what is designated as non-sensible appearance in the first place. In other words, Rancière argues that “if there is something ‘proper’ to politics, it... is not a relationship between subjects, but between two contradictory terms that *define* a subject” (2010:28-9), yet this is also precisely what is allegedly being *foreclosed* by the distribution of the sensible, which “specifically excludes... the possibility of a dispute over the very naming and counting of the constituent parts” preventing and limiting “such a dispute, or ‘disagreement’ [that] is for Rancière the very essence of politics” (Davis 2010:78-9).

Therefore, the politics which is being prevented here is one that could actually reflect upon the presuppositions and givens of what is sensible and what is non-sensible, which (in Foucault’s language) would perhaps mean a more *genealogical* politics that purposefully reflects upon those historical foreclosures of possibility. If we understand the distribution of the sensible as re-enacted and re-iterated in everyday practices, interactions, discourses and appearances – as an order which “exists, is reproduced, only insofar as subjects recognise themselves in it and, via



repeated performative gestures, again and again assume their places in it” (Žižek 2008d:312) – then this is also something which must have a binding history or genealogical lineage which is being appealed to and presupposed as ‘given’. In other words, such claims to what ‘counts’ as legitimate or illegitimate can only be justified on the basis of assuming some un-challengeable origins and givens that maintain this partition. As such, a truly radical politics must find a way to not only undermine or resist these historical presuppositions, but reframe and *détourne* them, in order to demonstrate their contingency and open up the possibility of that which is being designated (and dismissed) as ‘impossible’.

This therefore requires a particular politics that is “a historically conscious critique of the present that recurs neither to universal norms nor to conviction” (Brown 2001:95), but instead “reorients the relationship of history to political possibility” (Brown 2001:103). In other words, stemming from Nietzsche (and then Foucault), such a genealogical project aims to re-tell history in order to demonstrate the fallibility and arbitrariness of such ‘common sense’ limits on possibility, demonstrating that when something is regarded as impossible and non-sense (for example, a radical alternative to neoliberalism after the crash) this can, despite its taken-for-grantedness, actually be questioned and deconstructed. For Foucault then, what genealogy “really does is to *entertain the claims to attention* of local, discontinuous, *disqualified, illegitimate* knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchize and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects” (1980:83 *emphasis added*). For any resistance which intends to bring about social change, there therefore seems to be a need to undermine the given-ness of

the distribution of the sensible, but this *can only be achieved if power is recognised as a distribution* which “isn’t localised in the state apparatus” as “nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the state apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are also changed” (Foucault 1980:60).

In order to disrupt these taken-for-granted limits on possibility, it is necessary to re-tell the story of how those limits came about in the first place, taking a view of history that recognises how “we inherit not ‘what really happened’ to the dead but what lives on from that happening, what is conjured from it, how past generations and events occupy the force field of the present, how they claim us, and how they haunt, plague and inspirit our imaginations and visions for the future” (Brown 2001:150). In other words, if we see history as something which is constructed *from* our present preoccupations – rather than as something which is straightforwardly a ‘cause and effect’ determining the possibilities of the present – then “history becomes less what we dwell in, are propelled by, or are determined by, than what we fight over, fight for, and aspire to honour in our practice of justice” (Brown 2001:155). Indeed, if “past’s play in the present is elective, interpreted and imagistic” (Brown 2001:166), then past foreclosed resistances might then be redeemed (see Benjamin 1999), opening up possibilities by retroactively positing *our own* presuppositions (Žižek 2006b:201-8).

Whilst accepting *complicity* to prevailing power structures, therefore, such a genealogical approach does not accept *foreclosure* and instead seeks to demonstrate the radical contingency of the supposed ‘givens’ of political possibility

(i.e. the distribution of the sensible). What is currently considered to be ‘impossible’ or ‘non-sense’ is suddenly shown to be a construction of power, therefore offering the opportunity to positively assert such excluded possibilities against their designation as irrational and unreasonable. By making visible the historical a priori and the conditions of possibility, such an approach instead asks: “what if instead of stigmatising the unacceptable in order to supplant it by the acceptable, one were to call in question the very rationality which grounds the establishment of a regime of acceptability...?” (Gordon 1980:157-8). The point at which possibility is foreclosed via appeals to common sense can therefore be made visible (i.e. be made to ‘appear’) via a genealogical politics that demonstrates the historical non-necessity of that foreclosure and disrupts the rationality claimed by the ‘regime of acceptability’.

However, it is precisely this type of politics which has apparently been prevented in contemporary society, with a number of theorists going so far to argue that we now live in a *post-political* era, by which is meant “the foreclosure of the possibility of politics and the tacit embrace of global capitalism” (Dean 2006:115). The concept of ‘post-politics’ itself, however, remains quite controversial. Whilst previous proponents of the term seemed to be shying away from using it in their post-crash writings (e.g. Badiou 2012; Žižek 2012), others have pointed out that – while it may have been relatively easy to claim ‘post-politics’ in the (comparatively) apathetic period before the crash – this makes little sense in an era of resistance, activism, occupation, revolution and mobilisation. Indeed, whilst Dean appeared to be comfortable to use the concept before the crash (see 2006:123-5); she nevertheless argues in no uncertain terms that “Žižek’s description might have worked a decade

or so ago, but not anymore... [in the context of] massive uprisings, demonstrations, strikes, occupations, and revolutions” (Dean 2012:46).

On the other hand, however, we can find a number of examples in which political possibility still seems to be foreclosed by the ‘tacit embrace’ of pre-existing systems (or the distribution of the sensible) in contemporary society. What’s more, these examples – which can be grouped into foreclosures of agency (‘flexing muscles’), imagination and collective organisation – appear to be limitations which *persist* after the crash and *in spite of* a renewed context of resistance.

Firstly, in terms of agency, much social theory around the idea of post-politics has focused on what appears to be a democratic deficit in contemporary parliamentary governance, which portends to represent citizen grievance through the electoral process, yet seems instead to be a set of “government oligarchies enlightened by their experts” (Rancière 2010:28). Because neoliberalism creates certain limits on the reasonable and legitimate reach of the state by making the market the source of authority, there appears to be a distribution of the sensible at work on the edges of governmental action, which in turn limits the possibility of agency that voters might have through that system. In other words, as Badiou puts it, there seems to be a kind of “parliamentary fetishism that in our society fills the place of democracy” (2008:7) and nothing demonstrates this better than the reaction of governments to the financial crisis.

To take one extreme example from Italy, when the financial crisis led to the forced resignation of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, the government did not call for elections but instead appointed ex-European Commissioner and technocrat Mario

Monti to office. The economist was bought in to design and lead Italy's reaction to the economic crisis, yet was appointed without any mandate from the people. As such, we can suggest that his call to office was treated as a 'sensible' decision (that an 'economic expert' was needed in order to rescue Italy's finances) rather than a democratic one, demonstrating that the legitimacy of his power was seen as coming from neoliberal authority rather than democratic authority, and turning "politics such as the size of the public deficit and the public debt, formerly the subject of intense political debate between national parties... to strict financial fiscal rule" (Hopkin 2012). This final line of what could be considered a 'sensible' reaction to the crisis was therefore *not* one drawn by the people, or even by their representatives, but by the apparently 'post-political' foreclosure of possibility by market rationality.

This leads us to our second foreclosure. As I have already pointed out above, the financial crash revealed a severe limitation on the very idea that there could be an alternative society to the current one, indicating a profound lack of political imagination. Because radical alternatives were foreclosed through a designation of their 'non-sense' and 'impossibility', neoliberal capitalism (as a distribution of prevailing norms) was able to simply adopt the position of common sense in approaching the financial crisis. However, we can also see this in other spheres of crisis, such as the adoption of market-led reasoning in approaching climate change. As Swyngedouw has argued, the climate crisis can be described as 'post-political' in that any alternative (that is, 'sustainable') future simply has "no name" (2010:18) indicating an approach that is "radically reactionary, one that forestalls the articulation of divergent, conflicting and alternative trajectories of future..."

environmental possibility and assemblages” (2009:610). Rather than thinking outside of a ‘common sense’ market-led approach to climate change, it seems instead that imagination towards addressing climate change is being foreclosed, as is demonstrated by the popularity of numerous environmental disaster movies which suggest that “the world’s premature ending in climatic Armageddon seems easier to imagine (and sell to the public) than a transformation of (or end to) the neoliberal capitalist order that keeps on practicing expanding energy use and widening and deepening its ecological footprint” (Swyngedouw 2010:8).

A market of environmentally-friendly ‘green-washed’ products has therefore been the chief approach to this crisis, where “anxieties over consumption have created niche markets” (Littler 2009:1) which “channel people’s fear of climate change into endorsing one particular, neoliberal, set of solutions” (Littler 2009:95). The irony being, of course, that this speeds up the obsolescence of non-green items by creating more consumer demand and expanding growth via those sustainable commodities. But with governments reluctant to do anything which might constitute a collective approach to tackling climate change (which could put fetters on capitalism and the financial market by limiting growth); they instead encourage “biographical solutions to systemic problems” (Bauman 2004:51) where consumer-citizens can ‘vote with their dollar’ and buy those products which align with their political concerns. The political imagination therefore seems not only foreclosed in terms of discerning another (sustainable) social model, but also in terms of imagining that there could ever be something more than individual actions (i.e. a collective organisation) to tackle it.

Our final example of the foreclosure of politics is therefore one which prevents such collective organisation and instead emphasises individualised approaches to contemporary grievances. Indeed, insofar as the consumerist approach to environmentalism can be understood as indicating “the scale of our collective failure to deal with these problems on any significant level other than through small palliative measures orchestrated through lifestyle choices of the sufficiently privileged” (Littler 2009:14), then such *consumerism* can also be understood as presenting a ‘post-political’ foreclosure of political possibility. Contemporary consumer capitalism therefore appears to be an economic model in which the emphasis is placed on the individual to act with political freedom through the boycotting or ‘buy-cotting’ of items that represent their grievance or their identity, “filtering the causes through individual lifestyles” meaning that “the organisation of individual actions in terms of meaning assigned to lifestyle elements (e.g. brands, leisure pursuits and friend networks) results in the personalisation of issues” (Bennett & Segerberg 2011:771). Furthermore, as well as an emphasis on consumerism, such a personalised approach also echoes some of the main concerns of neoliberalism in representing a libertarian distrust of the collective and the state as forums for collective political action, instead designating ‘sensible’ politics’ as that performed by the individual.

We will return to these themes of libertarianism, individualism and consumer culture as a neoliberal act of political freedom in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. But, for now, it is important to simply re-emphasise how such a turn to individualism through consumerism appears to foreclose a collective version politics and seems to indicate a certain merging of capitalist critique into capitalism itself. As Žižek

writes, this individual-consumerist limitation even has potential ethical consequences, in that it risks interpassively maintaining consumer capitalism via its own appraisal. For example:

“When confronted with the starving child, we are told: ‘for the price of a couple of cappuccinos, you can save her life!’ ... the true message is: ‘for the price of a couple of cappuccinos, you can continue in your ignorant pleasurable life, not only not feeling any guilt, but even feeling good for having participated in the struggle against suffering.” (Žižek 2010:117)

With the ethical injunction pre-built into the purchase, as well as the critique of socio-economic inequality created by capitalism in the first place, the possibility of a politics which can fundamentally question such a distribution appears ‘impossible’ and ‘non-sensible’ whilst this route to addressing such problems is being advocated. As such, it seems that, paradoxically, the “critique from the left not only accepts the basic terms of neoliberal capitalism, but actually promotes ‘alternatives’ that ultimately advance its cause” (Hickel & Khan 2012:206).

Through these examples of restricted agency (parliamentary governance), imagination (climate crisis) and collective organisation (consumerism), it was my intention to briefly demonstrate how certain foreclosures of possibility remain all around us *despite* claims that the post-crash ‘age of resistance’ indicated a radical opening up of possibility and opportunity for social change. Yet the question remains as to whether it is actually useful or productive to use the concept ‘post-politics’ to think about these limitations. Returning to Dean, whilst agreeing that “aspects of the diagnosis of de-politicization [are] well worth emphasising”, she nevertheless argues that the theories and concepts of “post-politics, de-politicization and de-democratization are inadequate to the task of theorising this



conjecture” (Dean 2009:12), criticising writers like Rancière for seeming to “write as if the disappearance of politics were possible, as if the evacuation of politics from the social were a characteristic of the current conjecture” (2009:14). In a scathing attack on ‘post-politics’, Dean therefore dismisses the concept as “childishly petulant” (2009:12) and as indicative of “a retreat into cowardice, the retroactive determination of victory as defeat because of the left’s fundamental inability to accept responsibility for power and to undertake the difficult task of *reinventing our modes of dreaming*” (2009:10 *emphasis added*). In other words, Dean suggests that a more genealogical politics which could ‘reinvent our modes of dreaming’ through a critical reflection on the limits of possibility is *itself* being prevented by the very idea of ‘post-politics’ as a ‘retroactive determination of victory as defeat’ and the unwillingness to take the power necessary for change.

Others have also been vocal about ‘post-politics’ as a theory of foreclosure which is actually *foreclosing* political possibility itself. Jonathan Dean, for instance, has argued that while “narrations of apoliticality are, in principle, underpinned by a desire for a return of politics”, it is nevertheless the case that “if one fantasmatically invests in narratives of apoliticality then the emergence of politicisation will very likely be experienced as troublesome, even traumatic, as they potentially disturb the deeply sedimented frames of reference that have come to constitute the symbolic universe of the academic left subject” (2014:462). Post-politics is therefore seen as a foreclosing concept which – whilst rightly pointing out foreclosures of possibility – also limits possibility itself for those using it, by precisely investing into that symbolic framework (i.e. an investment in their designation as non-sense and impossible). Such a melancholic position, it is argued,

pre-distributes those using the concept as the 'powerless' and plays into their designation as 'non-sensible' and 'impossible'.

However, on the one hand, I would maintain that 'post-politics' can be useful in certain circumstances. For instance, "when seen as a critique of the professionalization, cynicism, elitism and depoliticization which often characterises parliamentary politics in advanced capitalist societies" (Hewlett 2007:188), the term seems to carry a critical potential that points to the foreclosure of possibility in that system, whilst prompting a further suggestion of what 'politics proper' should be in contrast to that 'post-political' system. Yet, on the other hand, there is a real risk that this concept plays into an already prevailing fetishisation of the position of the underdog in activism and resistance (or what I will describe in the conclusion as the melancholic 'siege mentality' of 'ressentiment'). As such, whilst much of the theory of post-politics as a concept of political foreclosure informs my critique of Occupy (in) London, I propose not to use the concept itself, but instead use Dean's definition of the concept as 'the foreclosure of possibility' to indicate this problem.

In this section, I have argued that the politics which continues to be foreclosed after the financial crash is one that is able to actually reflect upon those foreclosures (i.e. a genealogical politics). As I will argue, whilst Occupy (in) London demonstrated *some* potential in facilitating such a critical reflection upon these presuppositions (such as through the tactic of occupying space and the slogan 'we are the 99%'), they were ultimately unable to achieve such a politics, *because* of such a limitation of possibility. Problematically, they continued to be foreclosed by a post-crash distribution of the sensible, which prevented radical action, imagination and

collective organisation by designating such radical politics as ‘non-sense’ and ‘impossible’. In other words, it is argued that Occupy (in) London were unable to disrupt and *refigure* the distribution of the sensible, which (for Rancière) constitutes ‘politics’ (and for others constitutes a ‘genealogical politics’). As I argued in the introduction, this thesis could therefore also be taken as an attempt towards such a genealogical analysis that seeks to trace such limiting presuppositions of the movement and understand the foreclosure of Occupy’s politics in the post-crash context.

## Conclusion

It has been the aim of this chapter to propose a theoretical framework that we can use to understand power and resistance in the context of a foreclosure of political possibility after the financial crisis. Through a particular reading of Rancière’s distribution of the sensible – in addition to making links to Foucault’s theory of power and resistance (as well as Butler and Žižek’s critique) and the debate around the concept of ‘post-politics’ – it is my concern to understand why it is that so “rarely in history have so many people voiced their discontent with the political designs of the elite... yet rarely has mass protest resulted in so little political gain” (Swyngedouw 2011:8). As will be argued throughout, the possibility of a politics which could *challenge* the hegemonic reassertion of neoliberalism after the crisis was foreclosed by a distribution of the sensible that presented itself as ‘post-political’ (i.e. pragmatic; technocratic; reasonable; rational; sensible). I therefore position myself against any analysis which suggest movements like Occupy had the

unique “capacity to intervene in our setting, making it and us different from what we were before... not of continuity with... capitalism but of rupture, of a hole or break” (Dean 2012:216) and instead agree with those who argue, on the contrary, that we must “attempt to ensure that our desire to see real politics return does not prompt us to misidentify political dissatisfaction with the current order as the dawning of a new political age” (Winlow 2012:20).

While Rancière’s theory derives from a specific historical context (May ’68), it remains useful in that it shares similar political concerns that I intend to raise with Occupy, including questions of urban space and resistance, questions of power and organisation, and questions around counter-culture and authenticity. As such, I have put forward a case here to use the ‘distribution of the sensible’ as a framing concept that can help us understand this context of foreclosed possibility in which Occupy came about, aiming to capture the nature of a power that coerces, limits and controls, via appeals to the ‘sensible’ (or, the ‘obviousness’ of the situation; the givens; what is common sense; normative; reasonable and rational; legitimate) as well as designations of the ‘non-sensible’ (or, that which should not appear; which should ‘move along’ and is ‘nothing to see here’). In the post-crash context, neoliberalism presented itself as the former – the only ‘sensible’ way forward to inform decisions in approaching the crisis – meaning that the very idea of an alternative was foreclosed as ‘non-sense’, foreclosing movements (like Occupy) which sought to mobilise towards, find and prefigure some alternative system.

If we understand the reassertion of neoliberalism after its own crisis as a reassertion of a normative distribution of the sensible, then we can begin to

understand the structural impacts of this ideological manoeuvre in drawing partitions and divides throughout society of what may or may not legitimately appear. As such, when Occupy sought to make their grievances *appear* (both aesthetically and ideologically), they instead found themselves designated as non-sense, *foreclosing* the possibility of a radical alternative from becoming sensible. *This*, I argue, is fundamental to understanding the post-crash moment and the apparent failure of such movements to bring about a society different to the one which preceded the crisis. Indeed, the reassertion of neoliberalism after the crisis could even be said to have *relied* upon the designation of such alternative appearances (like Occupy) as ‘non-sense’ – illegible, invisible, inaudible and *incomprehensible* – in order to be reaffirmed as the only ‘sensible’ way forward.

### 3. 'Whose streets?'

#### Occupy in space

“...occupation inscribes a gap that makes antagonism appear and forces this inscription as the division between the 1 percent and the rest of us.”

Jodi Dean (2012:244)

Returning to Finsbury Square in July 2013 (just over a year since I first walked into the campsite) there was no longer any trace of the camp. The space had been landscaped and new turf had been brought in to replace the soggy cardboard pavements. Muddy tents and unwashed activists were now city workers on lunch, lounging in the sunshine, eating paninis and sipping on iced coffee. Where there had once been an information tent, the library of radical books, and a banner which read 'Capitalism Isn't Working: Another World Is Possible'; there was now a memorial to the casualties of the Moorgate underground train disaster, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1975, reasserting an 'official' history through spatial design. The fenced-off monument indicated that this was not a space for the appearance of resistance; but for remembering the collective sacrifices made for an efficient city transport system. At the entrance a sign reads: 'Welcome to Finsbury Square. Opening Hours 8am till Dusk Daily' and includes a diagram of a picnic bench and a figure with a ball, designating this as a space for leisure and enjoyment; not politics.

In this chapter, I aim to understand this politics of space in terms of its foreclosures of possibility and the resistive potential that the occupation of said space might be considered to provide. As argued in the previous chapter, if the distribution of the sensible is able to assert power through a normative designation and partition of some grievances as legitimate, rational, reasonable, sensible voice and appearance

– whilst denying this recognition to others – then this is also an *aesthetic* distribution which maps out onto material space. As such, I argue that occupation holds the potential to *challenge* this normative distribution, by *making (what is distributed as) ‘non-sense’ appear against its designation as such*. In order to push this idea further, I follow a large amount of literature that has sought to understand the Occupy movement by turning to Situationism, as well as noticing how “the daily practices of occupation associated with [Occupy] reveal a remarkable congruence with the central features of Lefebvre’s formulation” (Schein 2012:336). As I also suggested in the previous chapter, therefore, some more productive comparisons can be made between Occupy and the political theory – like the Situationists and Lefebvre – that many have associated with May ’68 (see Bonnett 1989).

The first section outlines Lefebvre’s understanding of power in the city by demonstrating the normative distribution of the sensible use of urban space which is created through material design and architecture. However, I nevertheless disagree with Lefebvre’s conclusion that this means the ‘festival’ – as unproductive enjoyment – can therefore have radical potential in challenging that distribution. Not only does this idea seem to remain complicit to the use of the space outlined in (neoliberal) policy initiatives (such as, the ‘creative cities’ idea); but it also presupposes that resistance can find a place ‘outside’ of power. As such, I turn instead to the Situationist idea of *détournement*, which is based on similar theory to Lefebvre’s in terms of understanding urban space, yet does not see resistance as something which needs to happen ‘outside’ of power but can instead come about from a point of complicity within that distribution.

This then leads us onto a discussion in the second section of the specific uses and possibilities which Occupy (in) London was able to utilise – both practically and symbolically – in this urban context. I make the argument that the occupation of urban space *does* possess radical potential (even in the context of a foreclosure of political possibility) because it allows the opportunity for the ‘impossible’ to appear *despite* its designation as such. In the final section, I then further bolster this argument for offline activism, by comparing it with the widespread praise and excitement for the internet as an arena for resistance. While it is not my intention to deny the important role of social media – without which there would surely not have been post-crash resistance to such an international extent – I argue that the techno-utopianism of theorists like Manuel Castells risks overlooking some of the key problems of foreclosure in online space. In order to make this critique, I draw upon Dean’s theory of communicative capitalism as well as Žižek’s theory of ‘interpassivity’.

## **Occupy as a festival**

Whilst Lefebvre does not use ‘the distribution of the sensible’ as a concept, I argue that he seems to point towards something very similar when he conceptualises urban space as a dialectic between the ‘lived-in’ immediate experience of its users *and* the material planning of that space by its architects. For Lefebvre, space is ultimately a distribution of appearances and a distribution of power because it is designed with technocratic aims in mind, and therefore “the city writes and assigns, that is, it signifies, orders, stipulates” (1996:102). If space is divided, distributed and



designated by its presupposed 'sensible' purpose and use, then these are judgments which (like Rancière's theory) are both normative and aesthetic, formulating "all the problems of society into questions of space and all that comes from history and consciousness in spatial terms" (Lefebvre 1996:99). As such, in-line with the model of power I set out in the previous chapter, Lefebvre allows us to think of urban space as both the condition and foreclosure of possible appearance, coercing those within by signifying them as sensible or non-sensible.

In this sense, planning and urban design can be understood as a material distribution of the sensible, with architects and planners operating from points of authority and expertise while those 'dominated' by these plans (i.e. the users of the space) reiterate and extend those designations. Through urban planning, in other words, the architect possesses a unique "power of technique, of technology, a mechanised, calculated, controlled, measured way of operating" (Elden 2004:114) and, from this perspective, the city is rendered functional and instrumental by operating in-line with normative designs and 'common sense' distributions of the 'sensible' use of urban space. Because they see their role as objective, the urban planner therefore privileges the dominant distribution of the sensible over any user valuation of that space from below, meaning "the experience of the architecture is the experience of the architect, who lays claim to both the production and the reception of architecture" (Hill 1998:5).

This distributing power of urban design can perhaps be illustrated by the recent controversy over 'spikes' being used in London. The studs and points which have been installed outside supermarkets and private residences, as well as under

motorway bridges recently came under fire for being an apparently purposeful attempt to 'design-out' homeless people from the city. As a defensive architecture, these spikes are often "added on to the street environment at a later stage, but equally with a lot of new developments it's apparent that questions of 'who do we want in this space, who do we not want' are being considered very early in the design stage" (Vallee in Quinn 2014). In a way that resembles 'bum-proof benches' (see Davis 1990) which are designed to be 'barrel-shaped' and with high arms in order to prevent the homeless from sleeping there (but also to keep workers and consumers moving through central spaces of circulation), the anti-homeless spikes seem to represent a distribution of the sensible through material and aesthetic design. Such political artefacts (Winner 1980) therefore can be read as efficiently distributing space and materially asserting what may or may not 'sensibly' appear in-line with prevailing notions of what counts as legitimate appearance and what does not.

For Lefebvre, such technocratic valuations of space are therefore politically problematic, in that they draw upon expert-knowledge and appeal to a rational or efficient use of that space at the cost of the user's evaluation and use of that space. As he argues, the city planner only "achieves the concept of habitat by excluding the notion of inhabit, that is, the plasticity of space, its modelling and the appropriation by groups and individuals by the conditions of their existence" (Lefebvre 1996:79). Subsequently, Lefebvre concludes that resistance must take the form of an anti-technocratic reassertion of the user's valuation of that space, which he calls 'the festival' or "the eminent use of the city, that is, of its streets and

squares, edifices and monuments... *la Fete*" (1996:66) which possesses radical potential as a "true space of pleasure" (1996:150). Indeed, it is precisely the loss of the festival in contemporary society which Lefebvre sees as foreclosing the possibility of radical politics in the city, arguing that the return of such pre-modern uses of urban space offer a model for resisting the normative capitalist distribution. It is my contention, however, that whilst Lefebvre's theory does allow us to usefully extend the distribution of the sensible specifically onto urban space and see how power operates materially in such spaces; the idea of 'festival' does *not* offer a useful model for resistance to that power for at least two reasons.

Firstly, his argument that unproductive enjoyment, leisure and enjoyment are 'resistive' does not seem to hold water in the context of contemporary capitalism, where such characteristics are seen as *adding* to the cultural allure and the 'edge' of the city, making urban space a vibrant and exciting place to consume and work. Indeed, as Žižek has pointed out on a number of occasions, contemporary capitalist ideology precisely operates through such an insatiable injunction to 'enjoy!' (2008e), which is something that the idea of the festival seems to *comply* with rather than challenge. Instead of breaking with the prevailing distribution of the space, therefore, the appearance of transgressive enjoyment in an urban festival could actually be seen as complicit with the norms of consumer capitalism.

Indeed, Lefebvre's invocation of spontaneity, enjoyment and creativity as a form of resistance in the city, sounds very close to values and policies which are actively being peddled as useful for economic growth. Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), for instance, is an international bestseller and policy

phenomenon which precisely emphasises such a use of the city, arguing that creative cities can spur economic growth by encouraging buzzing and trendy neighbourhoods as places “where everyday innovation occurs through spontaneous interaction, a place literally seething with the interplay of cultures and ideas, a place where outsiders can quickly become insiders” (Florida 2002:227)<sup>5</sup>. Yet, as has been pointed out, this is a vision for the city which actually works “quietly with the grain of extant ‘neoliberal’ development agendas, framed around inter-urban competition, gentrification, middle-class consumption and place making” (Peck 2005:740-1), encouraging inter-city and inter-neighbourhood competition; causing gentrification through rocketing housing prices of ‘festive’ locales; and turning the city into a place where middle-class culture and consumption patterns are considered ‘sensible’ at the expense of others.

This therefore raises similar concerns to those which David Harvey (1989) put forward in his idea of ‘the entrepreneurial city’ where, above all, the *competitive* city has to appear as an innovative, exciting, creative and spontaneous place to live, work and consume, with festivals, spectacles and displays of cultural events and arts being taken as symbols of a *competitive* urban policy. In contrast to Lefebvre’s transgressive festival, therefore, such unproductive enjoyment actually suggests a *dominance* of the capitalist distribution of the sensible, or, as has been argued elsewhere by Lambert, “whilst not wanting to allow the complete co-optation of

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<sup>5</sup> That this description of ‘creative cities’ bears such a resemblance to the Occupy movement is not only problematic, but also (as I will show in chapter 5 when I discuss the common roots of the counter-culture and the ‘new spirit of capitalism’) is non-coincidental. In fact, as it turns out, Richard Florida’s website even pre-dates the Occupy movement in quoting Victor Hugo that “you cannot resist an idea whose time has come” (Peck 2005:758)!

creative thought and action by the neoliberal agenda, it must be recognised that even radical art projects depend to some extent on (neoliberal) arts funding initiatives, and there is arguably no space entirely free from the kinds of creative imperatives celebrated by capitalist entrepreneurs like Richard Florida...” (2013:5-6).

This then leads us onto our second potential problem with Lefebvre’s understanding of resistance as a ‘festival’, in that the idea seems to rely on a presupposition that such a transgressive enjoyment can and should find an ‘authentic’ space ‘outside’ of such prevailing distributions of power. Such a position, as I will demonstrate in chapter 4 and 5, creates a number of problems in overlooking the necessary *complicity* of activism with wider structures, lending itself to an un-reflexive fetishisation of resistance as a ‘structureless’ space. Indeed, if we are to agree with Foucault that there is ‘no outside’ to power, then the task must be to understand and reflect upon such complicities in order to *avoid* the political foreclosure of possibility.

As such, it seems that the Situationists – who (like Lefebvre) saw radical potential in urban space and recognised the power of the capitalist city to foreclose that potential – could offer us an alternative theory which is willing to accept and think reflexively about that complicity. As Bonnett has pointed out, a main difference between the Situationists and Lefebvre is that the former saw radical ‘situations’ as happening *within* the distribution of power (or what they termed ‘the spectacle’), “because such alienating images have now spread throughout the entirety of social representation” and they therefore argued that “merely to oppose them through a

series of ‘alternative’ or ‘oppositional’ clichés and roles is to become part of the spectacle” (1989:135). As such, this seems to return to the tension within Butler’s work outlined in the previous chapter, between being foreclosed by the distribution of the sensible, or re-figuring such complicity with these normative categories in order to outgrow and explode it.

By thinking through complicity beyond foreclosure, therefore, the Situationists differ from Lefebvre by recognising that “even the most eccentric or oppositional stance towards the conventional landscape cannot break out of the spectacular chain of meaning” (Bonnett 1989:139) and that resistance therefore has to be formulated from *within* that chain. As such, the Situationist concept of ‘détournement’ offers us a radical way to think about this problem, in that it “involve[s] taking elements from a social stereotype and, through their mutation and reversal, turning them against it so it is disrupted and exposed as a product of alienation” (Bonnett 1989:135). This *turning* of pre-existing categories and meanings pre-distributed as sensible within a space can therefore create an opportunity to resist that distribution *despite* complicity. What’s more, in the context of a technocratic ‘post-political’ approach towards city planning, this is also an approach which seems to move “away from technocratic solutions to social problems and towards the re-use, and political resignification, of the existing environment” (Bonnett 2006:35).

Therefore, despite Lefebvre’s recognition that the city has in-itself become “a high quality consumption product for foreigners, tourists, people from the outskirts and suburbanites... a place of consumption and a consumption of place” (1996:73), he

seems to contradict this recognition by maintaining that the ‘unproductive enjoyment’ of festivals can carry resistive potential. This is far from clear in the creative city, where such spontaneity and enjoyment seems to have become *part* of the sensible use of urban space and, whilst the Situationists also emphasise festivity and play as “the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and this transformation into a superior passional quality” (Debord 1957), the important difference is that they see this as stemming from a point of complicity and as an “opportunity for unofficial and popular elements to playfully *invert* social and cultural conventions...” (Sadler 1999:34 *emphasis added*).

I have indirectly argued in this section that we need to complicate the relationship drawn between enjoyment and resistance. Lefebvre’s fetishisation of festival space as transgressive and ‘outside’ of prevailing power relations risks overlooking how such excessive enjoyment is in fact central to the functioning of the contemporary capitalist city, in creating opportunities for spontaneity, excitement, consumption and lucrative creativity. As such, it might be better to consider resistance in terms of a subversion, re-figuration or *détournement* of the city, which permits Rancière’s politics as a step towards “that moment when those who are not speaking begin somehow to speak – this moment is only made possible by the prior production of space from which speech can appear” (Chambers 2013:120-1). Indeed, as I argue next, if space possesses a distributing power in designating appearances as legitimate or illegitimate – sensible or non-sensible – then the occupation of space as a *détournement* of that distribution may be understood as offering us the *potential* for a radical politics.

## St Paul: Patron Saint of tent-makers

In what follows, I aim to outline what I see to be the potential political benefits of occupation as a tactic for resistance in a moment of foreclosure, in particular by facilitating a movement's publicity, their longevity, and giving their appearance symbolic context. Indeed, using Lefebvre's ideas on the distributing power of urban space, we can perhaps begin to understand London *after* the financial crisis as materially *embodying* the normative power of the post-crash reassertion of neoliberal normativity, through a partitioning and designating of possibilities (and impossibilities) of sensible appearance. It could be argued, for instance, that the police prevention of activists from occupying Paternoster Square (home of the London Stock Exchange) by erecting lines of fencing and blocking off the square acted as a material and spatial assertion of the market as 'private property' where such political appearance should not appear. In other words, the neoliberal premise that the state should protect the autonomy of the market from politics, as well as underpin private property, was *materially re-designated* at the gates of Paternoster. This denial of occupation was therefore both a normative and aesthetic re-establishment of the stock exchange and financial system as 'autonomous' and *not* a space for political contestation or intervention after the crisis.

Subsequently, Occupy LSX therefore ended up being pushed back from the stock exchange and onto the steps of St Paul's cathedral next door. Right from day one, however, this caused a certain amount of tension and disagreement within the



movement, with some activists seeing this as a problematic founding foreclosure of their resistance:

“Even Occupy starting off, that was originally an attempt to occupy Paternoster Square where the... or the London Stock Exchange... and it was only the fact that people got *kettled onto St Paul’s that they ended up there!* It’s the same with this place [Finsbury Square], people were in a building down there and they got kettled onto here, so they stayed here. So really, it’s the police who started this all! *It’s the police who started this movement!* And that’s why *we’re at the whims of the system*. All these people say: ‘oh yeah, we’re having a great rebellion’ and all this... well, it’s actually *them* who forced us into this place, they’ve forced us in here.” (2012:2)

This suggests a certain concern that the original policing of Paternoster Square and the prevention of the movement from camping there ‘set the tone’ for Occupy LSX’s resistance by foreclosing and limiting their appearance from the beginning. The worry, this activist argues, is that despite others thinking this was a ‘great rebellion’, such a foundation was actually evidence for the complicity of their resistance with the police and the ‘whims of the system’.

On the other hand, however, others saw this accidental occupation of the steps of St Paul’s cathedral as a blessing in disguise, describing it as a positive or fortuitous turn of events for the movement:

“It was quite magical that Occupy got corralled where it got corralled because, had it stayed in Paternoster Square, I suspect that it wouldn’t have had anything like the impact it had: involving the church, putting the church on the spot, was brilliant... but even that was unintentional.” (2013:12)

“Yeah I think that, absolutely St Paul’s was perfect! I mean, as I’m sure you know, we didn’t originally intend to occupy St Paul’s, we originally intended to occupy outside the stock exchange. We didn’t realise there was already an injunction on it. So the St Paul’s option turned out to be absolutely perfect because, in every way, it juxtaposed the state and the church. The most iconic building in London, thousands of tourists all the time, then the church foolishly got themselves embroiled in the argument and ended up

with resignations and all the rest of it.” (2014:12)

Despite the police having ‘corralled’ the activists into the space outside for the cathedral, therefore, these activists maintain that this led to an unpredicted and unforeseen possibilities and permutations for the movement. What’s more, although ending up there by accident, the new context was seen as actually *expanding* the potential of their resistance.

As such, in comparing Paternoster Square and St Paul’s, the first apparent benefit of occupying space was that it seemed to simply offer a unique political possibility for making their grievances *publically* appear. Many saw St Paul’s churchyard as a better space than Paternoster Square simply because it was much more open, public and performative than the closed-off plaza surrounding the stock exchange with bars and restaurants. Indeed, having been re-designed in the 1990’s, the area around St Paul’s was meant to precisely facilitate the efficient flow of traffic, tourists and workers through the centre of London and, as such, was supplied with a regular blood-flow of a public audience:

“I think having it at St Paul’s was a *god-send* (and I make the pun advisedly) in that, had we been in the much more *secluded* square next door where the stock exchange is...” (2014:3)

“Some people complained about it and said we should be occupying next door in the stock exchange. But I don’t think we could have stayed there for more than a week. I don’t know if the place made the whole thing a bit more *messianic* in character, but yeah, there was quite a lot of good about that place. It was very *central*, with *people going past all the time*. Finsbury Square was still central, but it didn’t have massive flow through... it was on grass so it got more and more muddy, which was part of it, it couldn’t support that number of people in terms of footfall or where to piss. For specific political ends they’re quite good, but for *distributing flyers, making a scene*, getting people to *contribute stuff*... you want to be *central and open*.” (2014:7)

“I think first and foremost, the fact that it was smack bang in the City of London and it’s such a prominent place where there’s such high footfall outside St Paul’s. In terms of relationships with our surroundings – I’m really against this idea that somehow St Paul was a ‘saviour’ in really keeping the movement alive, that somehow organised religion was working with us, I immediately discount that – but in terms of *space*... If you look at Occupy London in terms of inclusivity and diversity, then it’s *almost a PR exercise based on a social movement*. It was in a good space to attract people to walk through.” (2014:8)

The particular space outside St Paul’s was therefore seen by these activists as a ‘god-send’ for the movement in that it allowed Occupy to be much more public, prominent and open than the secluded Paternoster Square, able instead to ‘make a scene’ in a central space with high footfall. What’s more, these activists sought to demonstrate the benefits of this space by not only comparing it with Paternoster Square, but also the sister-camp at Finsbury Square, emphasising the importance of centrality in order to fulfil *practical* things like handing out leaflets or receiving donations (indeed, as the last occupier puts it, St Paul’s offered the stage and the audience for a sort of ‘PR exercise’).

As well as facilitating these practicalities of public appearance, the campsite could also be seen as maintaining the movement’s *longevity* by simply providing the material space needed to sustain the movement. The space outside the cathedral, in other words, provided the occupiers with the opportunity to achieve a *semi-permanent* public appearance:

“This protest is *incessant*. There’s been incessant pressures on governments and institutions and they are... yeah, it’s not *just a march in the street*, a march in the street is *more like a party*, a gathering of people...” (2012:9)

“In reality, I think we made many mistakes and I don’t like to think of Occupy as this great thing that changed the world, because it didn’t. It marked a point in history, but now the movement has declined a lot. To me,

we haven't been able to make a transition from when we were *occupying public space* – because that creates *certain conditions which is so much easier to organise around* – to now being completely separated and divided across the country or across the city, you know?" (2013:10)

"In hindsight, when the camps were evicted, I realised that the physical presence was really really important. And I think my own perception of the general public sentiment towards these camps is much more positive in hindsight than I could have been, which I think is a really good thing." (2014:4)

Being 'incessant' in their appearance – as compared to more short-lived tactics, like marches, which the first activist suggests are 'more like a party' – created 'certain conditions' for organisation, meaning that Occupy could potentially maintain the appearance of their grievances beyond a short-lived urban festival. Unlike a march or a 'flash mob', then, the camps permitted a performance of longevity which, at least for the latter two activists, was the biggest loss to the movement once the camps were evicted.

Furthermore, this public semi-permanence was seen as closely tied to the democratic aims of the movement, in allowing conversations and dialogues with an ever-rotating audience of 'onlookers' or participants who could (in theory) freely join in the General Assembly (GA):

"Occupy has been able to provide that sort of... like St Paul's from October till mid-December was that sort of vibrant city-square, or was like what I imagine Athens was, where you have all the political discussion. Because *you need people on the street*. And you don't have political discussion just if you go to a public meeting, actually you have them *on the street*... *Unless you link up physically; there's not much you can do really*." (2012:11)

"I'm interested in actions that take part on the street and cause onlookers to interact with those of us that are there. Because people will be saying 'What's going on?' 'Why are you doing that?' And that's what I'm interested in, that conversation." (2013:4)

These particular sentiments have also been echoed by social researcher and Occupy activist Sam Halvorsen, who has argued that such occupied spaces were useful for permitting the ‘encounters’ and permeable ‘boundaries’ which complemented the movement’s politics, creating a space in which “power was negotiated and new social relations were produced” (2015:314). Occupying public space was therefore seen as creating a material basis for a more *inclusive* organisation, with the material presence facilitating an ease of interaction with the public and therefore creating engagement with the movement’s ideas<sup>6</sup>.

Beyond the pragmatic characteristics of space, therefore, we also need to think about the occupation of St Paul’s as being directly linked to the movement’s post-crash resistance and, in particular, the ways in which they attempted to use and refigure the spatial context of their appearance to their advantage. For instance, precisely because Paternoster Square had been fenced-off, policed and reasserted as a non-contestable space (materialising the neoliberal limit of politics); Occupy LSX’s performance of democratic ‘openness’ attempted to demonstrate how, in the stock exchange, “only a specific type of public is welcome, and their activities are restricted to those of work and consumption” meaning that “the camp itself was an intervention, a critique of the undemocratic design and control of the urban space that surrounded it” (Koksal 2012:447). The occupation could therefore be read as an attempt to directly challenge the normative distribution of the stock exchange as ‘private space’, demonstrating the undemocratic nature of this space after the financial crisis, at a moment when austerity was having widespread impact as a

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<sup>6</sup> While such ‘openness’ is important, however, this should not be fetishized as a value in-itself as (I will argue in chapter 4) is the case with the idea of ‘prefiguration’.

consequence of the crash. In other words, Occupy's juxtaposition with Paternoster demonstrated the democratic deficit of a market beyond the possible reach of political contestation.

Occupation can therefore be seen as having possessed the potential to directly contrast and materially re-figure or *détourne* the over-riding (neoliberal) distribution of what could or could not sensibly appear within the post-crash city space of London:

"To me, basically, since capitalism has always tried to privatise everything, but even more so after neoliberalism started, like, in the 70's / 80's... started to privatise every square metre of the city. *It's only through the use of space that we interact with people and we create identities and we create political alternatives...* And now we live in a very *individualistic* society and people don't engage with each other; but *that's the only way we can create a change... by engaging with other people*, talking, that sort of thing... and that can only happen through *space*." (2013:10)

"I think, to come back to this point of sticking your flag in the ground and saying: 'this is ours!' in a world where they are privatising everything in a heartbeat. The act of occupying space... that's a *spatial imperative* to all activism now I believe. Because *without space, you can't organise*, you can't come together, you can't socialise, you can't have a free exchange of ideas." (2013:11)

"Yeah there's an audacity to it. And there's a *spatial imperative* to all activism now, because everything has been privatised and if you don't occupy space now... there won't be any public space left." (2014:9)

As is repeated here, contemporary activism was understood by these activists as having a 'spatial imperative', seeing this as necessary in defending against the normative distribution of urban space rendered private and technocratically useful for capitalism and neoliberalism. In this sense, occupation was seen as possessing the potential to resist the privatising-individualising distribution of the sensible by asserting *public collective* identities.

One activist in particular was very enthusiastic about this political potential of occupying space, seeing it as a direct challenge to the dominant distributions of the city which sought to prevent such appearances:

“It’s becoming increasingly difficult for us to occupy space. But the tactic of occupation – which is as old as humanity itself – is not going away and will continue to manifest itself whether it’s illegal or not (and Occupy has never really cared if it’s illegal; it’s cared whether it’s right). And that’s a really important principle, *not to work within the restrictions of ‘you can stand here, you can’t stand there...’* It will continue: 10% of the world is on land it ‘shouldn’t be on’; 10% of the world are squatters... so it’s as old as humanity, it will continue, it will become more vital, and *people will continue to stand up by sitting down.*” (2013:11)

“Every space has its conventions. And if public space is taken away (and it is being taken away, large swathes of the city are being taken over as private enterprise zones) well, you can’t leaflet, and you can’t busk, and you can’t beg, and you can’t loiter (because that brings down sales) and you can’t congregate... I mean human rights, left, right and centre... so the occupation of space, the *defiant* occupation of space, saying this is *ours*, the city’s *ours* because we are *citizens*, is the most valuable thing that Occupy can bring (and it will continue to bring that in many different forms). We will continue to assemble in crisis; just as they are all over the world.” (2013:11)

What is considered to be obvious and sensible within a space – its conventions and restrictions of where to stand; the neoliberal designing of large swathes of the city towards the needs of capital – can therefore be challenged by occupation as a defiant ‘non-sensible’ appearance. Indeed, the very language of ‘occupation’ suggests that such material appearances are directly contentious of that ‘proper’ use of such space (Pickerill & Krinsky 2012) which, as Angela Davis has argued, contrasts with the military use of the word in that “we transform the meaning of ‘occupation’... we turn ‘occupation’ into something that is beautiful, something that brings community together... something that calls for happiness and hope” (2011:133).

As such, occupation as a form of resistance should be recognised as creating a radical *détournement* of the specific symbolic-spatial meanings of the particular context of appearance. For Occupy LSX, for instance, this context was the buildings and architectures which directly surrounded them outside St Paul's cathedral, and as such, a link can be made between the *practical* benefits of occupying (longevity and publicity) with the *symbolic* benefits of that context:

"If we ended up in Paternoster Square, we would have probably have just been there for the weekend. But because we were in St Paul's churchyard, there were busses passing by and people became more curious. People were saying we were desecrating St Paul's cathedral; but we pointed out that *St Paul was actually the Patron Saint of tent-makers* and he wouldn't have been put off by it. Where do you think St Paul the tent-maker would be, in the cathedral or in the tents?" (2014:2)

This appropriation of the religious symbolism of the space was particularly effective in calling the bluff of St Paul's as an institution of moral guidance and, in doing so, implying questions around the societal and moral implications of the crisis. Indeed, the Christian metaphors and images of the context permitted a number of potentially cutting performances of this critique, providing a rich cultural history which could be turned and used to challenge the re-establishment of post-crash neoliberal normativity:

"To anyone who's read the New Testament, or the Synoptic Gospels, they're going to look at that and go: 'that's odd, because Jesus was throwing the moneylenders *out* of the temple, but this particular temple is being *propped up* by the moneylenders!' It was *resonant* to do that, but it became a side-product. It took down a few people in the church, but it's not like St Paul's has closed down and the Christian church has ended, anymore more than the stock exchange has closed down." (2014:5)

"Absolutely it benefitted from the spectacular setting... what a *stage*! I mean, you can see the difference. When I was at Finsbury Square, people didn't tend to come (and that was actually closer to the heart of many of the



corporations and businesses we were protesting about). So the setting is very important. Space is very important. This is a space designed for social interaction and photographs, it's hundreds of years of architectural knowledge has gone into making this a place where you can come and look at things. So, in many ways, it's perfect. And also the contrast: juxtaposing such opulence with people in tents, the idea of the tent and the cathedral, David and Goliath, the money-lenders and the believers outside the temple. So it's just dramatic and media-framing and the image is quite important." (2014:9)

Beyond the practical properties of occupying space 'in general', therefore, occupying this space 'in particular' was seen as offering a number of unique symbolic opportunities to tap into the presuppositions and underpinnings of dominant institutions like the church, the stock exchange, and the City. The stories evoked above – David and Goliath, kicking the money-lenders out the temple; St Paul as the Patron-Saint of tent-makers – acted as a potentially impactful frame for their grievances over inequality and injustice after the crisis.

Furthermore, by having the cathedral as a backdrop, this also allowed the protestors to make an appearance on a national stage by being in front of a national landmark. Accidentally and fortuitously, Occupy LSX could therefore be said to have found themselves outside of a 'monumental space' as a "metaphorical and quasi-metaphysical underpinning of society" (Lefebvre 1991:225) that can be said to offer "each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage... it thus constitutes a collective mirror more faithful than any personal one" (Lefebvre 1991:220). In other words, Occupy LSX were provided with a number of contextual narratives which allowed them to play on themes of national identity, using the hypocrisy of the church's silence towards to greed and inequality of the stock exchange next door to make their critique appear nationally:

“St Paul’s was *unbeatable*. I mean, I honestly think St Paul’s was unbeatable. I don’t think the UK has a better place... I mean it in terms of location and symbolism. Absolutely not... I mean we happened to have water nearby which was great, but concrete is not a very comfortable place and it was very cold. So it’s all about symbolism. What was good about St Paul’s is that, first of all, it’s a beautiful building. Secondly, it’s got an enormous history, its phenomenal the history of it. I don’t know it all, but I feel like there was a divine intervention we ended up there. [It] was so rich for us in terms of text and sloganism. There were things about how St Paul’s hadn’t been closed since the war and it got closed for us!” (2014:10)

By virtue of occupying the space outside St Paul’s cathedral, Occupy LSX were able to challenge the normative distribution of the monument’s national space, turning it from one in which such politics should not appear into one where the ‘non-sensible’ political and moral questions of neoliberal austerity could be posited. Indeed, the subsequent controversy and confusion (as has already been mentioned) resulted in a number of high-profile resignations at St Pauls, *on both sides* of the debate: with Canon Chancellor Giles Fraser quitting in *support* of the movement and Cathedral Dean Graeme Knowles quitting *against* the movement (stating that his position had become ‘untenable’ because of the occupation).

In addition to their *national* appearance, however, it could also be argued that Occupy LSX forced its appearance on an *international* scale by virtue of their occupation being in the City of London. A key node of international finance (and therefore, like Wall Street, central to the crisis) the ‘square-mile’ is not only the most prosperous district in London; but also one of the wealthiest in the world. Yet, as the policing of Paternoster attested to, this is not a district of public space or democratic governance, but is instead run by the unaccountable and private ‘City of London Corporation’. Rather poetically, the corporation’s autocratic power, wealth and inequality is therefore something that could be said as *materially* embodied by

the City's architecture. For instance, despite being built on Ludgate Hill (the highest relief in the area), it has becoming increasingly difficult to make out St Paul's against the unregulated skyline of London, taken over by (what Lefebvre might call) the "arrogant verticality of skyscrapers" whose very purpose is to "display... to convey an impression of authority to each spectator... verticality and great height have been the spatial expression of potentially violent power" (Lefebvre 1991:98). The inequality, unaccountability and injustice of the global financial system was therefore materially and symbolically embodied by these buildings; allowing the juxtaposition of the tents with the skyscrapers to further suggest that critique.

Despite these practical and symbolic advantages of occupying that space, however, there proved to be numerous challenges and limitations with operating and maintaining urban campsites in the middle of London, not least in protecting their appearance against a prevailing distribution which wanted to 'move them along':

"One of the guys there [Leyton Marsh] got an ASBO [Anti-Social Behaviour Order] for being there. And the terms of the ASBO says he can't go anywhere near an Olympic building or even anyone connected with the Olympics (which is basically anywhere in London when the Olympics are on!)" (2012:2)

"[My] idea is to march on Parliament Green from all directions. And because you're *only allowed to protest on there for 24 hours* and then you've got to go... So the idea is just to Occupy Parliament Green for as long as possible. They've made laws so they're escaping us. We've got this beautiful plot of land in front of them to show how angry we are and yet they've not allowed us to do that. Only for a small amount of time, then we can be ignored. But I feel like that should be taken back and really... yeah, you know, like 'the battle for Parliament Green... Parliament Square'." (2013:1)

The examples these activists provide demonstrate precisely how the distribution of the sensible can operate by policing appearances. In designating Occupy as 'anti-

social' (giving someone an ASBO for their activism) or by designating the space outside of Parliament as a zone limited for 24 hours of appearance; London's space is being partitioned and designated alongside normative appeals as to what can and cannot legitimately appear there. In other words, power does not need to operate through explicit state violence here, but instead through the distribution of the sensible use of urban space that limited political appearances after the financial crisis.

As well as the law, however, the more basic difficulties of camping on the city streets also created a number of challenges for Occupy (in) London as the winter turned wetter and colder. Tents and tempers became tired and frayed as sleep-deprivation and constant proximity to others compacted the effect of the cold paving slabs; cathedral bells; persistent media scrutiny; local patrons of pubs and the cathedral alike shouting abuse or even turning violent; as well as a lack of food or hygiene. What's more, providing provision for people already living on the streets and sometimes with alcoholism, drug addiction or mental illness, added extra strain on the movement. For one occupier in particular, who had a background in social care and supporting addicts, the role she took in the camp was solely to provide welfare to those who needed it and, for her, this provision was the biggest challenge that the movement faced:

"Welfare at Occupy meant, by default, becoming a street outreach worker, because we were on the street and a lot of homeless people and so on come in, and our job was to support them and refer them to agencies. And you know, sometimes there was some really dangerous situations to address. *It wasn't always a perfect little community of thriving activists looking after each other.* The cops, for example, quite happily if given the opportunity, would come in and bust somebody if they thought there was a pot deal

going on or something like that. Then that would *create a lot of tension*, sometimes violence, you know, it was hard. And there were lots of moments like that... It's got to be said that just *living* in those circumstances, where you are *constantly at risk* of people being arrested or kicked out or something going on (it wasn't the safest of space) was in itself going to lead to *disillusionment and burnout*." (2013:5)

"Being at St Paul's... I mean one of the things that used to drive me absolutely *mad* was the constant cameras! It's like, just go away! I mean, I'm naturally a little bit paranoid by nature and I got to the point where I just... because I didn't know who they were, I didn't want to know who they were, I had a job to do, so I was really frustrated that I couldn't move ten yards without somebody else sticking a camera in my face... I mean, it was literally 'dodge the camera'. Often time, they would just show up out of the blue, you didn't know who they were, *you didn't know if they were going to be friendly in the press* or not... Being at St Paul's was really important for giving publicity to the movement, but it had its limitations and, in some ways, it was *human frailty* or *vanity* or whatever... which was the limitation. *Some people were just there because they wanted to be on telly*, not many I imagine, but it was really exciting." (2013:5)

There are a number of things we can take from this account of Occupy at St Paul's.

In particular, that the inclusion of London's homeless into the movement was a matter of contention – whether seen as a drain on resources, presenting the wrong 'image' (for instance, drug use) or as potentially bringing violence – yet their inclusion was also, at the same time, seen as a test of the democratic credentials of the movement (how could Occupy claim to be 'the 99%' whilst not including those who were suffering most from inequality and excluded from the urban distribution of the sensible?). The relationship with the media is also interesting in that the 'homeless question' added to the self-consciousness of the appearance they were attempting to portray. This made the relationship with the media and the homeless an *aesthetic* concern ('how do we appear?') which put a further strain on the

movement's aims to prefigure an alternative (we will return to this theme in the next chapter).

A number of the occupiers who did not feel so 'welcome' at St Paul's – including many of those who were homeless or struggling with addiction – subsequently sought refuge from these pressures at the second campsite set up at Finsbury Square, but this exile soon became a major division within the movement as many began directly comparing the two camps and 'othering' Finsbury in order to emphasise the virtues of 'their' site at St Paul's:

"Because they [Finsbury] are the *fringes* of society, maybe they're prone to the afflictions of being on the fringes of society. So I mean, you went to the camp didn't you? I mean, I was quite saddened by what I saw. It was mass alcoholism, drug-taking... it stank of piss, it really did... and I felt a bit sad about that." (2013:1)

"I knew some people that made the first move to Finsbury Square when it was occupied and I was never quite sure why this happened... but I think Finsbury Square especially was *not a very tactical use of space* because it was in a little area of parkland surrounded by office buildings... whereas St Paul's was in a kind of... there's about three different major public walkthroughs and causeways in that area, so it was a channel of the public and this was really important, I think." (2014:4)

"I'm all for occupying and I think occupation is a powerful tool... it's a powerful tool for showing a *presence* and trying to get some kind of *identity* out there and *unification* or some kind of *solidarity* to build. But Finsbury Square... I think the identities and the people were an issue, especially in the later days, because it became less about the movement and more about containing and trying to help homelessness and people with mental health problems. It lost its way in that sense..." (2014:8)

As people attempted to escape the difficulties of living at St Paul's by moving to Finsbury Square, they began a split within the movement (with 'difficulties' being outsourced to the latter). Indeed, being much more under media scrutiny than Finsbury Square, it felt as if there was more at stake at St Paul's and that it was

therefore crucial to 'keep up appearances'. Yet this also created double-standards in the democratic claims of the movement as Finsbury Square began to be marginalised and side-lined both symbolically and *materially* as Occupy LSX began to prevent resources from being allocated (or what they saw as 'wasted') there.

These physical challenges of occupying space therefore created many obstacles and deep divisions within the movement, yet for one activist, they nevertheless added to Occupy's *legitimacy* and *authenticity* as resistance, seeing the campsites as a performative commitment to hardship:

"...and the space itself was so *unhospitable*; that alone made it quite perfect!"

*Why was it important it was inhospitable?*

"Well, I think because people just look at it and think: 'how extraordinary that these people are actually living here, y'know? Actually creating a life there, they've got a kitchen and a library and... it's all functioning!'"

*What about Finsbury Square and Mile End?*

"Well, I think both of those were more conventional. People put tents on grass, y'know, that's what they do. Both of those weren't on paving slabs outside this huge building. And I think in one way, they were more respite space, because it was difficult to sleep at St Paul's, bells go off every quarter of an hour (which is a nightmare as you can imagine!)" (2014:12)

Here, adversity was actually suggested as benefiting activism by making it painful and difficult enough to allow a performance of perseverance and fidelity to their cause. Their very survival against the odds, in other words, is cited here as being politically pertinent through a certain 'impersonation of bare life' where they were able to 'perform' the structural implications of capitalism (see Tyler 2013:11).

Interestingly, however, this activist does not attribute such virtuous adversity to Finsbury Square (ignoring how difficult life at Finsbury had become with their lack of resources) and only viewing the adversity which she (and others) faced at St

Paul's as politically meaningful (whereas Finsbury Square was designated only as a 'respite space').

For those at Finsbury Square, in contrast, they saw their camp as the only one left in London which was carrying the true and authentic momentum of the movement (a claim which became stronger after the eviction of St Paul's). For one activist, for example, Finsbury was the longest running campsite in the world and it was therefore the only one which had maintained the original intention of the movement to actually 'occupy' space (in contrast to what he perceived the ex-St Paul's contingent were now turning their activism into):

"For me, Occupy is about *occupying a space physically*, and like I said, people come along, and if you can help the community that's good, and if you can't then maybe you should jog on and go and start one somewhere else." (2012:7)

"That [Finsbury Square campsite] can actually go. And yeah, the grass would be fucked for a few months, but then it can all be disappeared. Whereas these things [Islington office blocks] they could be here for 500 years if people just abandoned them. They would take years and years and years to grow over. And that... there's so little potential. You see that [the camp] and you go: 'oh, lots of potential for doing things.'" (2012:7)

Such a defence of occupying space for political potential (or possibility), therefore, was based upon Finsbury having *more permanence* than Occupy LSX – which, according to this activist, had now moved 'online' and become a "cloud above the city" (2012:7) – yet was also based upon the camp having *less permanence* and material imposition than the architectural design of Islington in terms of the office blocks and skyscrapers which surrounded Finsbury Square.



In outlining these different debates over the occupation of space, it has been my intention in this section to argue that this tactic had a number of *potential* benefits for resistance in allowing publicity, organisation, persistence, and a symbolic juxtaposition with institutions like the stock exchange, the cathedral and the City of London. But in the second half, I have also begun to problematize the fetishisation of such space, by outlining some of the difficulties and divisions which it caused within the movement. My overall concern, however, was to further outline the distribution of the sensible and to echo some of the sentiments expressed by Lefebvre that “it is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived and produced” (1991:162) and therefore “there is an immediate relationship between the body and its space, between the body’s deployment in space and its occupation of space” (1991:170). As such, it is argued that when the activist bodies occupied the post-crash spaces of capital, they carried the *potential* to challenge the post-crash distribution of the sensible simply by ‘perceiving, living and producing’ an appearance in that space. Indeed, this is a relationship to space that has been repeatedly pointed out by others since the Occupy movement, including David Harvey who has reasserted that “the street is a public space that has historically often been transformed by social action into the common of revolutionary movements” (2012:73) and that “the collective power of bodies in public space is still the most effective instruments of opposition when all other means of access are blocked” (2012:162). This is an argument, however, which seems to directly contradict a number of other theorists who continue to emphasise *online* space as an instrument of opposition.

## The keyboard warriors

While this chapter has so far aimed to demonstrate the possibilities and difficulties of occupying *offline* space, it is nevertheless its opposite – the virtual space of the internet – which has been central in so much theory, analysis and attention when looking at contemporary social movements. Particularly in the period since the crash, much social thought has focused on framing resistance with reference to the internet (for example, when the spring in Tunisia and Egypt were dubbed the ‘Twitter Revolutions’ (Beaumont 2011). In particular, for Occupy (in) London online space meant connections with other Occupy movements; the organisation of events; the publicising of the movement through social media (*Twitter* and *Facebook* being the main contenders); the broadcasting of meetings and direct action through live feeds (using *Bambuser* or *Livestream*, but also recordings posted on *YouTube*); as well as the email lists which permitted discussion outside of the camps themselves.

The rise of social media, portable devices and affordable on-the-go internet access was therefore widely cited as an original and unique addition to social activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and this was a view shared by many within the movement:

“Fuck yeah man! *Social media is the boss*, yeah?! It’s an extension of what we are. And globalisation and the internet... we have it like possibly in the last 15 [years]... it’s not even available on the whole planet, but this is like *the final tool*, no? With the social media and the new generations coming with their technology... I have a global culture and a global identity.”  
(2013:8)

“If it wasn’t for the internet, Occupy wouldn’t actually have *happened*. For us, I mean, *Livestream* is the one that... if it wasn’t for *Livestream*, Occupy wouldn’t have become as big. I mean, the *BBC* isn’t exactly what you would

call impartial, impartiality for them means not mentioning everything, which is censorship.” (2014:2)

“People say: ‘oh no, we’ve tried all this before, blah blah blah’ and I say: ‘*did you have the internet?!*’” (2014:6)

For these activists, the internet is ‘the final tool’ for activism that could facilitate some sort of global cosmopolitan identity and solidarity amongst resistances, extending the movement beyond the immediate material occupation through streaming applications like *Livestream*, as well as making it ‘bigger’ *without* relying on the mainstream media framing or selection of coverage. Indeed, for many, this latter benefit of social media was the crucial one, allowing movements to independently and autonomously extend their movement (with very little cost) beyond its immediate setting in order to inform others without the biased distribution of the sensible by mainstream media. Referring specifically to *Livestream*, these pro-internet activists also explained that:

“What I found and why I carried on doing it for six months, is because people were coming down from all over the country and saying: ‘look, I was watching you on *Livestream*, thank you so much for sharing it!’ And I feel that’s actually *helped people to see what’s going on*. Who we are and different faces (some of it you know...) Yeah it’s not produced and it just happens as it happens and its, you know, it’s always... you can’t help what’s happened there. But I found it powerful...” (2012:16)

“For me, it’s useful because it’s *informing people*, they might be in another part of the country, but it’s useful to do that. Unfortunately, you do have these accusations of being ‘rent-a-protestor’... but for us, it’s like, just *educating people* [that] we are out there, this is happening... unfortunately the mainstream media do not want to record it.” (2014:2)

“Social media were kind of like *the tentacles to the space* being occupied. So it was about getting messages out *instantaneously*, saying: ‘we’re having a GA [General Assembly] here, usual place, usual time... we’re doing something at Finsbury Square; we’ve taken over the Bank of Ideas...’ that kind of thing.” (2014:8)

Keeping people informed and in touch with the movement was clearly useful for cheap and effective organisation, utilising social media to extend the movement and advertise events in a way which they could directly control. Going beyond the material bounds of the material space, therefore, the internet was seen as potentially reaching wider areas and furthering participation or engagement with larger audiences.

What's more, the internet was seen as conducive to the inclusive and democratic aims of the movement by allowing this wider participation, especially for those who were perhaps *unable* to attend the spaces of occupation for whatever reason:

"For me, yeah you have 'clicktivism', the back office, but you also have people who are disabled or who have commitments to their family and have to stay indoors. It is actually clicktivism; but they can be *useful* as well."  
(2014:2)

"Occasionally, because I wanted a *voice*, I would 'keyboard warrior' it up. And we would be criticised for that: 'if you're so desperate to do something about it, why aren't you *here* standing side-by-side with your brothers and sisters?' The answer to that is: 'well, you're not my brothers and sisters, you're not listening!'" (2014:8)

"I think the one good thing about the internet is it does enable people who are perhaps less fit, less able, or perhaps for economic reasons unable to travel all the time (it's not cheap moving about in London!) [It] gives them the *opportunity to participate*. And I think that's a very big plus, and shouldn't be used as part of: 'oh, you've just an armchair activist!'"  
(2014:12)

For these occupiers, therefore, not only did social media appear to be in-line with their democratic politics by facilitating greater inclusion and participation; but it was also something which should not be simply dismissed as being a 'lesser activism' by virtue of such distance. Pointing towards some of the insults against social media users as 'clicktivists', 'keyboard warriors' or 'armchair activists', it is

nevertheless their contention that the *ease* of the internet is precisely its strength in allowing more people to participate who cannot attend the physical space of the occupation.

Many of these arguments highlighting the virtues of internet activism, of course, have their parallels in social theory and in particular have been rehearsed again and again by a student of Lefebvre: Manuel Castells. In his post-crash book *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, for instance, Castells re-applies his theory of 'the network society' to the movements of 2011, arguing that their very *origin* can only be attributed to online space. As he writes, these movements "began on the internet social networks as these are *spaces of autonomy*, largely beyond the control of governments and corporations that had monopolised the channels of communication as the foundation of their power throughout history" (Castells 2012:2 *emphasis added*). Furthermore, it is Castells' contention that such advanced communications technologies can inherently provide such space for authentic organisation by social movements, affording them the ability "to challenge the power embedded in the institutions of society for the purposes of claiming representation for their own values and interests" (2012:5). His argument for the radical possibility of social media is therefore based upon a presupposition that the internet is, in fact, an 'autonomous space', outside and free from the coercion and control of government and corporations.

In contrast, however, it has also been argued by a number of other theorists that this kind of 'cyber-utopianism' actually offers an overly romanticised and fetishized celebration of such technology, which ignores the way in which this space is very

much utilised by government and corporate institutions. For example, whilst still recognising that it would be “disingenuous to suggest that the digital realm has nothing in store for dissidents” (2011:67), Morozov maintains that the internet is far from an ‘autonomous space’ and instead lends itself to: intelligence gathering and surveillance (“in the past, the KGB resorted to torture to learn of the connections between activists; today, they simply need to get on *Facebook*” (2011:156); an over-reliance on social media as an end in-itself (“tweets, of course, don’t topple governments, people do” (2011:19); as well as a technological deterministic reduction of grievances (“since the only hammer such [cyber-utopians] have is the internet, it’s not surprising that every possible social problem is presented as an online nail” (2011:312).

Some Occupy (in) London activists also shared these concerns and criticisms of social media, but went further than Morozov by arguing that the internet was not only problematic for surveillance, over-reliance and reductionism, but also undermined the interpersonal *trust* they saw as necessary for collective action:

“I don’t think that’s a really effective way of changing the world, is to broadcast stuff. I think it’s good to have information online (so when somebody’s trying to figure something out, there is information there), but the *real change comes from face-to-face interactions.*” (2013:4)

“By *sharing a space*, you also need to *trust* each other. There’s so much distrust with activists because we’ve got so much trouble with undercover cops. Not just within Occupy, but many different movements. That unless you’re willing to *trust* the people that you work with, it’s really hard. It’s really hard, because many things you organise require a certain level of *secrecy*... and that’s something that *can’t be achieved online.*” (2013:10)

“I really think it’s... we’re very vulnerable to being addicted to it and also having a conversation *face-to-face* is infinitely better for *trust* reasons (which is important with activists) for *familiarity*... infinitely...” (2014:10)

When online conversations and organisation can be easily put under surveillance by state institutions (from the local police force to GCHQ) which can pre-empt and limit direct action, this does not lend itself to fostering trust between activists online. But further to this, the distance and anonymity of the internet is also cited as preventing the sort of face-to-face trust needed for *solidarity*. Familiarity, secrecy, privacy and interpersonal understanding are therefore seen as something which can only be achieved offline.

Others also offered similar criticisms of online communication, arguing against the hype of social media as a tool for activism and instead pointing out how it was not amenable to the type of democratic discussions they were seeking to have:

“There’s a flip-side of social media which is, kind of, endless *speculation* and *rumour* and a kind of *bitchiness*.” (2013:3)

“As online everywhere, it’s kind of relative anonymity... a bit like road rage (people in cars are very different people from pedestrians). I think, in the same way, if you’re on the internet thread, it’s much easier to end up being fairly *abusive* without questioning it. Like, when you’re in your car and there’s road rage because people are separated from each other in their protective box and they end up behaving in way different from if they were on the street.” (2014:3)

“Most of the time it’s *navel-gazing*. And they’re not actually that clever, you know? They’re not actually producing wisdom. If they were educating themselves it would be good, but I don’t think they are. Most of the time, they’re actually saying random shit.” (2014:10)

“Can social media provide an alternative? A very *bad* alternative! Because communication is so *hard*. If you’ve got to write everything, type everything in, and then wait and see what somebody else says, it’s a very ineffective way... you know, if you and I wanted to do this [interview] on email, it would take us ages and there would be no *depth* to it whatsoever.” (2014:11)

The distance of internet communication was therefore seen as fostering distrust and creating a loss of depth, with ‘speculation’, ‘rumour’, ‘road rage’ and ‘navel-

gazing' being typical of the 'keyboard warriors' (or 'trolls') that purposefully antagonise people online to cause arguments and friction. For these activists, in other words, the internet created a loss of reflexivity which turns into abuse and egoism, suggesting that Castells might be too optimistic in the use of this space to foster social movements.

Indeed, it seems that Castells not only misrecognises how this space is far from being autonomous from governmental agencies and is not well designed for the depth needed for democratic process, but also overlooks the *commercial complicity* of the simple act of online communication itself. Whilst he argues that networked communication is crucial because it allows fear to turn into 'outrage and hope', letting "social movements exercise counter-power by constructing themselves in the first place through a process of *autonomous communication*, free from the control of those holding institutional power" (Castells 2012:9 *emphasis added*), the very act of online communication could be seen as far from autonomous, but instead largely *complicit* with *communicative capitalism*. As Dean has argued, through such media, communication itself has become part of capitalist accumulation because of a "strange convergence of democracy [inclusion, discussion, participation] and capitalism in networked communications and entertainment media" (2010:4). Consequently, international networks of online communication actually *electrify the very circuits* of online capitalism, rendering all online communication and expression highly lucrative by adding to "affective networks [that] capture users in circuits of drive... the more we contribute, the more extensive our submission... with each click and intervention, moreover, we make a mark that can be traced, capitalised and sold" (Dean 2010:124).



Furthermore, Dean goes on to argue that such cyber-utopian positions (like Castells) can themselves be shown as complicit with the ideology of (what she calls) the 'new communalists' of west-coast America in the 1960s. These computer scientists were the first to frame the computer industry as 'counter-cultural' through apparently libertarian politics by rejecting the state and emphasising individual freedom. In other words, for online pioneers like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, this was a space which could uniquely *facilitate* autonomy and horizontality and had the potential to offer peer-to-peer communication which circumvented hierarchical or centralised power. Yet this philosophy "failed to acknowledge how their ostensibly countercultural practices themselves served as conduits for spreading the communication and control mechanisms of the technocratic" (Dean 2010:21) (we will return to this theme in chapter 5).

As such, rather than simply facilitating horizontal democracy, the internet has furthered the reach of the market *into* 'autonomous' communication, with each web-search for information, each debate, each profile, each message board, each creative commons licence, rendered *profitable* by simply *existing* in this space. The rise of the countercultural credentials of such information technologies, therefore, is *in-itself* a demonstration of the ways in which "capitalism captures critique and resistance, formatting them as contributions to the circuits in which it thrives" (Dean 2010:2). It does not matter to the owners of the circuits, servers or software copyright whether the material being circulated is subversive; what matters is that they contribute to the profitability of the internet via their very circulation. As such, Dean argues that it is extremely problematic that so many theorists and activists "continue to emphasise the democratic potential of the internet, even in the face of

the increases in economic inequality and consolidation of neoliberal capitalism in and through globally networked communication” (2010:31).

While this complicity with profitability by just being online was recognised as a problem for a few activists, this was not *widely* seen to be an issue because the benefits were understood to outweigh the costs. One activist in particular, however, seemed to sum-up this problem with online space:

“Social media is a cul-de-sac because it gives you the impression you are having political agency, when actually in fact you’re masturbating then falling asleep! It’s a horrible metaphor! But who are your followers? By definition your *friends*!”

*So it’s an echo chamber then?*

“Yes it is an echo chamber, but one that’s being *listened to* [i.e. state surveillance]. And every move that you make on the internet now is producing revenue for somebody, every search you do is making data for somebody and is sold to someone who can then use that for *profit*. You are generating income for somebody just by *moving* through cyberspace.” (2014:9)

This activist also offers another potential limitation of the political possibilities of online space, in that it might only allow for a *shallow* political agency by actually *preventing* the offline activism which (as argued in the previous section) is important for effective resistance.

Indeed, a number of activists argued that social media could actively *prevent* the motivation required for offline occupation:

“I think [offline activity] shows the authorities that people are prepared to take action. Like the modern system we have at the moment is far more *savvy* than systems we had 40 years ago. It realises that you don’t actually *need* to crush most stuff, you just need to find a way of giving it a space to operate in that doesn’t really get in the way. And so its ok if people are carping online, so long as they’re buying their stuff and not getting in the way, then fine.” (2014:3)

“I think [social media] is useful on some level, often in terms of raising awareness, but sooner or later we’ve got to... any kind of theoretical idea has to find a mode of *activity* or *practice* that kind of *enacts* those ideas, I think.” (2014:4)

“Yes, I think [offline space] is vital. Until we’ve got a gathering ground, until people are *motivated*, until there’s that moment of critical mass when it becomes evidence that people are willing to muster in large numbers... because I think, quite honestly, that anything else is pissing in the wind.” (2014:12)

By providing a space where criticism can operate, the online may raise awareness, but risks preventing the motivation needed for offline activity. As such, what these activists seem to be indicating is a situation “in which the object itself takes from me, deprives me of, my own passivity” (Žižek 2006a:24) or, in social theory, what might be known as a situation of ‘interpassivity’. What this term attempts to capture is the idea that our “most intimate beliefs, even the most intimate emotions... can be transferred, delegated to others without losing their sincerity” (Žižek 2008d:32) and this can be said to have consequences for activism insofar as beliefs in a cause or grievances are ‘delegated’ rather than acted upon.

Mark Fisher, for instance, argues that the Disney-Pixar film *Wall-e* might be said to be acting interpassively upon its audience. The film depicts a dystopian future where excessive consumption and global warming has made life on Earth impossible (with ‘humanity’ surviving on board a giant spaceship). The moral of the story is clear – we have to change our ways and take action now to prevent environmental catastrophe! – yet there is also the chance that the film relieves us of our passivity, by “performing our anti-capitalism for us and allowing us to continue to consume with impunity” (Fisher 2009:12). In other words, the film fills the audience with righteous indignation, but has now relieved them of their

passivity towards climate change and registers their discontent with the environmental damage of capitalism, allowing them to continue to embody and enjoy that system guilt-free (by, for example, going to the cinema).

The way in which some activists criticised social media suggested a similar concern with interpassivity. With Occupy (in) London in particular, the use of online video applications such as *Livestream* and *Bambuser* were often seen as having such an effect, allowing viewers to stream live events and feel like they are participating in resistance, whilst not only remaining passive; but remaining passive *whilst enacting those capitalist circuits which they were resisting against*. In other words, activists using *Livestream* could be said to be relieved of their authentic passivity, instead allowing them to feel active towards the movement (when they are actually enacting communicative capitalism).

The concept of interpassivity therefore allows us to reflect upon some of the ways in which occupiers understood the limitations of online space:

“Unless you’re so time-privileged that you can sit there in front of your computer all day... I mean, it is a *vanity project* that whole side of it. It’s just a little hobby-horse for people who have still got their day jobs. So they can go to work... basically, it’s their little ‘coffee table moment’ (or whatever it’s called... ‘water cooler thing’): ‘I don’t watch TV, I don’t watch TV its crap! What I do, is I get involved in, like Occupy, and I tell you... yeah I don’t watch TV, I watch *Livestream* of Occupy!’ Its Big Brother basically, isn’t it? Big Brother for people with degrees... It’s *vicarious* to actually have the drama there for everybody.” (2012:7)

“I know this thing sounds bad... I must sound like a Luddite or a Neanderthal or something... but I used to get annoyed even about live streaming meetings. Because there was so many people... like, you get a couple of thousand of them on the internet who would watch the live stream meetings, and you almost think... like just take that fucking lifeline away from them and maybe even like a dozen, or maybe three, would actually be bothered to come down and see for themselves what it’s like. And if we can

get three people in person, that would be far better than one-thousand on the internet, because those people – kind of like in the wake of Egypt and Tunisia – people have gone totally mad overboard with, like, internet activism. They've decided this is this new lightning bolt from heaven that's going to save us all, but the thing is (we were even talking about this last night)... the thing is, about like, say *Twitter* and *Facebook* and that, say, in Egypt or the riots, is that this kind of internet technology... *it allows people to organise better; but it doesn't supply the motivation for why they would organise in the first place.*" (2012:14)

Comparing *Livestream* with reality television and a radical identity project, giving the viewer some sort of distinction and vicarious association with the movement, was a particular concern for the first activist. His issue seemed to be that such media allowed for a interpassive relationship to the movement, relieving the 'people with degrees' from actually acting and taking part because they could enjoy the movement as entertainment online. The latter activist also picks up on social media creating a problem for motivating action in the first place, suggesting that there had been a certain fetishisation of digital activism in the post-crash era.

In particular, such 'clicktivism' was attributed to the design and architecture of online space, in that it allowed people to engage with the movement almost *too* easily, with a lower threshold of fidelity and commitment necessary for (what they saw as) a 'proper' participation. In other words, it was seen as problematic by some that social media appeared to be the *opposite* of the difficulty and challenging reality of living in the camps:

"...and maybe it's the, y'know, the internet age and especially smart phones... you just have a quick scan of information; but there's not much *depth* to it." (2013:1)

"On the Occupy London website, the percentage of people who just go on it and then just don't click onto another page is too high." (2013:2)

“Yes, there is a certain... we’ve moved into the realm of more cyber-activism. More ‘keyboard warriors’ is one ‘diss’ term. It’s very easy to sit in cyber-space and say: ‘why don’t you do it like *this*?’ ‘why don’t you do it like *that*?’ ‘you should have done *that*’ ‘sign this petition!’” (2013:9)

“Now we’re so dependent on the internet we don’t do face-to-face communication and that’s an *obstacle*. And also there’s so many people that don’t do demos or don’t take political action because they think it’s enough sitting at home tweeting about it. And you’re never going to achieve really radical social change if you think you can just do it through the internet! It’s about having a balance between online and face-to-face participation.” (2013:10)

Here the activists blame the ‘internet age’ and its specific technologies and designs – smart phones, webpages, e-petitions, tweets – for being obstacles for necessary offline action. In particular, they seem to see the architecture of the internet as having a lack of ‘depth’ for the type of participation that social change needs.

Against the cyber-utopianism of theorists like Castells (and some activists), then, online space was actually seen by many involved with Occupy (in) London as limiting and foreclosing the radical potential of the movement’s resistance:

“There is a danger of people just clicking and signing and ‘liking’ things and sitting there debating things endlessly in chat forums... but not actually getting out on the street; getting down the community centre; meeting the neighbours... y’know. Ever massively drawn back into a cyber-realm of people. Not everyone’s got the internet around the world, but definitely in this country, people have been getting deeper into their computers. Whereas it was slightly anti-social 15 years ago to be staring at the screen all the time; now people are *everywhere* with their laptops. I think there’s a mix and it needs to be... it might mean more people out on the streets and taking *direct* action.” (2013:9)

“Social media is a political cul-de-sac because it gives the impression that we are participating in democratic debate, but actually in terms of translating that into real change... it’s not getting through to the politicians; it’s not getting into the lobby groups. And we have to be very careful that if we post something and we get 20 likes and 15 comments – and we feel like we have political agency in the world – I don’t really think that we have. We have to

an extent because *consciousness-raising* is important. But we have to really bear in mind that *where it begins and where it ends is on the streets*. And on the computer it's 'whoa!' I mean, you have to *go* to a demo and you meet people! And you exchange their email address and you have a *conversation* and you see a poem and you see somebody make a speech and then you learn something... and you don't get that on the internet. And plus it's easier for them to spy on you as well, so we have to be very careful. I mean, it's there... but it should be a means to an end; it's not an end in itself, I don't think." (2013:11)

"I think, to some extent, engagement with stuff on the web can be a more *political palliative* in a kind of way? The people who might otherwise be out on the street can be active online instead. The idea that the virtual world, the physical world, are just different dimensions in the same reality... I think that's a comfortable way to think, slightly, but it underestimates the importance of people getting out and being in public space." (2014:3)

A means to an end but not an end in-itself, these activists criticise social media for being 'politically palliative' and preventing people for not actually getting out on the street. Being offline, they seem to suggest, is more effective for resistance than social media, allowing better democratic debate and conversations, as well as allowing for more *direct* action.

Therefore, while Castells does add the caveat that "social movements need to carve out a new public space that is not limited to the internet, but makes itself visible in the places of social life" (Castells 2012:210); it is argued that he nevertheless *over-emphasises* the importance of online space throughout the rest of his work. Indeed, even those activists who were willing to *defend* the use of online space for social movements seemed more willing to reflect upon the foreclosures and complicities of using social media than Castells, before concluding that the benefits outweighed the costs:

"I think it has helped *link* the world and it's an amazingly useful thing. You've got to be careful how you use it and you've got to be aware that nearly

everything can be monitored now (activists have been aware of this for a long time, but now it's gone into the major public with all the Snowden stuff and the NSA stuff and things...) It's majorly helped that, you know, we can be linked and talking to the Zapatista group in Mexico and – particularly with the recent Occupy – suddenly Hungary Occupy can be chatting to Egypt; and Tunisia can be talking to Ukraine; and whatever it is... Occupy Australia can chat to Occupy India... and we didn't have that in 1990.” (2013:9)

“But we're forced into all kinds of contradictions in this capitalist system. A lot of people are on *Facebook*, I'm mindful of what I post for that very reason. It's not an activist tool; it's a corporate tool. I would be very concerned if it was the only channel... but we have other channels: our own website, the *RiseUp* email list... So I think we're trying to do the best with what we've got. Trying to make sure there are lots of platforms for people to engage with Occupy.” (2014:1)

“I mean, I suppose it really goes back to this idea of ‘cultural capitalism’ again. Should you boycott the tools just because they belong to FTSE-100 companies? Because they are, by their very nature, for-profit companies? My answer to that is ‘no’. I think the good thing about Occupy was its capacity to use and disseminate information by social media – *Facebook* in particular, really – I don't see that there's anything wrong with that.” (2014:8)

Rather than opt for a cyber-utopian view which fetishizes online space, these activists defend it as part of a critical reflection on its limitations for resistance. Indeed, the very eponymous emphasis of *offline* space by the Occupy movement suggests a turn away from such internet utopianism and towards “spatial strategies, in particular relating to territory, [that] are suggesting a politics that moved beyond the network as the dominant spatiality of activism” precisely avoiding “fetishizing networks as an all-encompassing spatial logic of social movements [that] ignored the messy and dynamic ways in which activists engage with space” (Halvorsen 2012:432). Whilst it is therefore difficult to think of the speed, breadth and impact of the 2011 movements *without* such technology, it is my contention that Castells underplays the potential limits of digital space by



arguing that it facilitates “the capacity of a social actor to become a subject by defining its action around projects *constructed independently* of the institutions of society, according to the values and interests of the social actor” (Castells 2012:230-1 *emphasis added*). Such a position does not reflect upon the potential complicity of even transgressive values with communicative capitalism. As the Occupy (in) London activists above attest, therefore, online space is perhaps more problematic than Castells’ account allows, with his argument based on a romanticised presupposition that the online provides a space *outside* and *autonomous* from prevailing power distributions (rather than reflecting critically upon its foreclosures and complicities).

## Conclusion

The Occupy movement took its name from the tactic of occupying space which was being utilised by activists involved in the Arab Spring and European Summer of 2011, setting up camps in city centres (from Tunis to Cairo to Madrid to Athens) as well as taking over empty buildings and establishing squats. Whilst this tactic is by no means historically unique to 2011, it can perhaps nevertheless be argued as something *novel* in the particular context of the financial crisis and the foreclosure of political possibility I have highlighted so far. What’s more, these were occupations that spread internationally at an unprecedented speed, spreading the tactic of occupation through communications networks which suggested an important for new social media and global ICT technology. More than enacting ‘civil disobedience’, however, these occupations were also understood to be attempts to

*reclaim* public space from a market-led dominance of the city, and as such these movements were meant as a challenge to the ‘sensible’ use of space and what may or may not legitimately appear within them, aiming to argue that *this* is what democracy looks like (and not parliamentary government initiatives of austerity and quantitative easing).

It has been the aim of this chapter to demonstrate both the foreclosure of appearance via the urban distribution of space *and* the potential importance of occupying that space for resistance. The activists above gave reasons for occupying space which went *beyond* Lefebvre’s festival of unproductive enjoyment (avoiding complicity with neoliberal ‘creative cities’ policy) and instead pointed towards benefits such as publicity; semi-permanence and longevity; as well as the re-figuring of contextual symbolism. Furthermore, they mostly emphasised the importance of *offline* space as opposed to the cyber-utopian rhetoric of theorists like Castells, which I argue (alongside Dean) is especially important when all online circulation is incorporated into the functioning of a communicative capitalism. What’s more, through interpassivity, the risk is always that online activists will become ‘clicktivists’ or ‘keyboard warriors’ that are not compelled to join in offline activity.

In order to assert the visibility of their grievances (which are designated as ‘non-sense’ and ‘nothing to see here’) I have argued that the occupation of offline space has the potential to *enforce an appearance of ‘non-sense’ against its designation as such*. Through occupation, spatial texts can be appropriated, twisted and turned (or what the Situationists referred to as a ‘détournement’) allowing for a meaningful narrative to appear against that which would partition their appearance as

meaningless. Such a 'theatricalisation of political rage' (Butler 1997:232) therefore has the potential to trouble the 'common sense' logic of the distribution of the sensible by rearticulating or challenging the presupposed terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility. In other words, the occupation of space could be seen as an example of how "the politics of the abject is a counter-spatial politics which attempts to reclaim the spaces and zones of abjection as radical sites of revolt and transformation" (Tyler 2013:42).

However, whilst I therefore argue that we need to pay close attention to the aesthetic and material ordering of the city, we also need to move beyond space and consider the character of the movement *itself*. In other words, while "[there] are forms of practical and creative critique, physical strategies that contain an immanent imagination of resistance" we also need to recognise that "any desire to develop a politicised reading of everyday spatial usages cannot progress without an appreciation of their contradictory nature... we need to ask who is involved in these transgressions and who is excluded... we also need to question what social identities enable and structure these spatial activities" (Bonnett 1996:7). This final point, as I will show in the next chapter, becomes particularly important to consider in the context of a movement that was making a direct critique of post-crash neoliberal government as possessing a democratic deficit, whilst at the same time attempting to prefigure an alternative democratic organisation within their own space.

#### 4. 'We are the 99%'

##### On collectivity, universality and prefiguration

"There are also problems in terms of maintaining organisation structures when it is very inclusive and it is so open... But it's an important trade-off I think. The main value of Occupy is in the name: it's in the occupation of space (which is so central to it). *When there's no space to occupy, things fragment and unravel a bit unfortunately...* because there's no nucleus. I often describe it as kind of like a speck of dust: the site is like a speck of dust around which the raindrop gathers, and then if you have enough raindrops, of course, you have a downfall."

Occupy London Activist (2013:11)

It had stopped raining, but the paving slabs of Trafalgar Square held the water and created a mirror image of the marquee and the sign outside: 'Socialist Worker Party. NO CUTS. FIGHT FOR EVERY JOB. Strike to win. [www.swp.org.uk](http://www.swp.org.uk)'. It was May 2013 and there were no protest camps left in London, yet the march against austerity had nevertheless been organised using Occupy's network (albeit not under the name of 'Occupy' itself). Taking a step back and looking at the protest from Nelson's Column, the diversity of the flags, banners and iconography was clear. Anonymous were gathered in the centre with their hoods up and *V for Vendetta* Guy Fawkes masks on, waving their green flag with a figure in a suit and a question mark for a face. Another activist in a Guy Fawkes mask stood away from them waving a multi-coloured peace flag, whilst others held up homemade placards: 'YOU CAN'T TAKE THE PANTS OFF A BARE BACKSIDE!'; 'IT'S TIME FOR CHANGE. ENLIGHTENED HUMANITY DESIRES PEACE, FREEDOM, EQUALITY & SUSTAINABILITY'; Wake up UK. Our NHS is being sold off piece by piece'; STOP THE NEW WORLD ORDER'; GOVERNMENTS LIE, CHEAT, STEAL & KILL FOR PROFIT TO

MAINTAIN WEALTH & POWER FOR THEIR CORPORATE MASTERS’. Two signs in particular appeared somewhat contradictory: a group at the back (who appeared to be Black Bloc) held up a black sign with white text that simply read: ‘ABOLISH THE STATE’ while, to the right of them, a Socialist Worker Party banner read: ‘TORIES OUT. VOTE FOR US’. All the while the drummers were trying to create some energy. Some people danced, a few held up camera phones, others just stood talking under their umbrellas waiting for the march to Downing Street to begin.

In this chapter, I will be addressing a number of complex themes around *identity* and, in particular, issues of collectivity, universality and prefiguration. Whilst arguing for the political potential of ‘we are the 99%’ as an intended statement of both *collectivity* (an identity shared by those within the movement) and *universality* (an identity which goes beyond the movement itself, or “a process or condition irreducible to any of its determinate modes of appearance” (Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000:2); this chapter will nevertheless begin to outline what I perceived to be the foreclosures of the movement. Through their presupposition of certain distributions of the sensible – that grievances should be *individualised*; that collectivities should always be treated with suspicion as oppressive; and that openness and outside-ness should be fetishised as democratic ends in themselves – it is my contention that Occupy (in) London was unable to realise the full potential of ‘we are the 99%’. In particular, I suggest that this is due to those presuppositions (of individualism, libertarianism and prefiguration) creating division, disorganisation, symbolic inefficiency and inconsistency, and a qualitative limitation to the movement’s politics (all of which, I argue, could have been potentially facilitated by ‘we are the 99%’).

I will begin by outlining what I see as the political potential and possibility of Occupy's central slogan. In terms of collectivity, I argue alongside others that establishing and referring to a movement in terms of 'we' is crucial for at least three reasons: (1) as a pragmatic measure towards collective organisation; (2) as a facilitator of an efficient and consistent symbolic appearance; and (3) as a step towards a qualitative extension beyond the movement itself. However, insofar as this extension beyond the movement is expressed as a *universal* grievance (encapsulated by 'the 99%' and its implied universal assertion of democratic equality in the face of neoliberal injustice), it is also pointed out that this might risk relying on a certain level of *preclusion* as to what might be included within that identity.

As such, I will argue that whilst a movement's identity must entail *exclusion* (and avoid fetishizing openness); this exclusion must be made on an inclusive basis, where the movement's identity itself allows for a negotiation of its boundaries. In order to achieve this, however, what is required is a good deal of reflexivity on the unequal distribution of people within society (and Occupy's necessary complicity with that distribution) in order to prevent a foreclosure of the movement's identity (and possibilities) in advance. I will therefore conclude by arguing that activists need to jettison preoccupations with individualism, libertarianism and prefiguration, in favour of a more assertive and reflexive recognition of collectivity, universality and (negotiated) exclusion.

Because it is my contention that the Occupy movement in London was not able to capitalise upon the promise of 'we are the 99%', the chapter may appear quite

damning of the movement at times. But as I outlined in the introduction, my intention remains for this critique to act as a useful (genealogical) reflection upon the limitations and foreclosures of Occupy's politics; rather than a dismissal of the movement altogether. Indeed, as will become clear, many of the arguments I make are also arguments made by many of those involved in the movement itself, who (thanks to the critical distance allowed by interviews up to three years after the event) were willing to be critical and reflect upon these sensitive issues.

## What does 'we' do?

Speaking at Occupy Wall Street, Judith Butler professed her support for the movement, before suggesting to the activists that "we're standing here together making democracy, enacting the phrase 'we the people!'" (2011:193). As a statement of identity and political intent, this sentence picks up on some of the main characteristics and aims of the Occupy movement, including the assertion of collectivity and solidarity ('we'), the tactic of semi-permanent appearance in space ('standing here'), and the idea of pre-figuring and 'enacting' the type of society that they wanted to see in the world. What's more, Butler's *détournement* of the opening sentence of the U.S. constitution ('we the people') can be understood not only as an implied criticism of any democratic claims of the post-crash U.S. government (by suggesting that the movement were going beyond the state and actually *enacting* democracy); but also suggests a common identity *beyond* the movement which is both collective ('we') and universal ('the people'). However, while necessarily concise for public speaking (and for use with the 'human

microphone' technique employed at Zuccotti Park), Butler's sentence nevertheless leaves un-elaborated a number of quite complex themes and questions around the identity of the Occupy movement and the possibilities of their resistance towards post-crash neoliberalism.

Arguably the movement's largest legacy, the slogan 'we are the 99%' can also be read as an attempt to emphasise a collective and universal identity. In contrast to 'we the people', however, 'we are the 99%' also adds an implied criticism of both democratic deficit (that the 1% appeared to be holding disproportionate power and were leaving out the 99%) *and* the maintenance of extreme socio-economic inequality (with severe accumulation of capital for the top 1%). 'The 99%' is therefore more than a quantitative or descriptive statistic, because it goes beyond any "sociological statements requiring concrete delineable empirical reference" (Dean 2012:122) – for example, see Castells (2012:166) – and instead, at the same time, "expresses capitalism's reliance on fundamental inequality [whilst it]... asserts a collectivity" (Dean 2011:88). What's more, through claiming that their grievances included the vast majority of people, 'we are the 99%' can be understood as aiming to make a *universal* assertion of that common identity through "a metaphoric universalization of particular demands" (Žižek 2008d:243).

In order to elaborate further on this slogan, I will begin with a discussion of 'we' as a *collectivity*, before moving onto 'the 99%' as a *universal* statement. The 'we', I suggest, contains three political possibilities, as: a pragmatic measure towards collective organisation; a facilitator of a consistent symbolic appearance and self-identification; and as a step towards a qualitative extension.



Firstly, then, I argue that the assertion of a collective identity is a pragmatic measure and a pre-requisite for maintaining some sort of collective organisation over time and space. Indeed, in social movement theory, this is perhaps the most common argument made for establishing a collective identity (see Della Porta & Diani 2006:89-113), in that the establishment of a 'we' is said to enable activists to recognise allies and enemies (those who are on their side and those who they are directing their resistance towards). Or, as Snow puts it, a collective identity is necessary for "a shared sense of 'one-ness' or 'we-ness' anchored in real or imagined share attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined set of 'others'" (2013:267), adding that "such a vilifying framing of the collective character of an antagonist-opponent functions to demarcate boundaries between 'us' and 'them', good and evil, and right and wrong, as well as discrediting the movement's opponents" (2013:274). The first argument for establishing a collective identity, therefore, is simply that people need to identify with something (and against something else) in order to resist<sup>7</sup>.

Secondly and in addition to this, however, collective identities have also been argued as necessary for social movements, because they facilitate the consistency of their appearance by providing a symbolic efficiency in a context where points of reference for self-identification are often lacking. For instance, while Dean agrees with our first point that it is necessary for movement to "invoke a 'we' ... those of us

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<sup>7</sup> However, this also raises the question of the *framing* of such a relationship between the activist and their 'other', which may raise a number of potential foreclosures through cynical and conspiratorial narratives (see chapter 6).

opposed" (2009:2), she nevertheless goes further to argue that 'we' is also important in order to create a symbolic consolidation and disciplining of a movement's appearance. For Dean, in other words, the establishment of a 'we' has the benefit of allowing a movement to "appear to ourselves" even if "we say 'we' knowing that there are divisions and differences among us that we express and the term 'we' expresses" (2012:212). In particular, this is seen as required within the wider context of individualism, fluidity and symbolic inefficiency in contemporary society (and especially in consumer capitalism), where "political intensities become shorn of the capacity to raise claims to the universal, persisting simply as intensities, as indications of subject feeling" (Dean 2009:39) because they are caught up in a distribution of "plural, hybrid and mobile imaginary identities" (2009:55). Or as Žižek puts it, one problem that needs to be overcome is a decline in symbolic efficiency, where "the overall demand (complaining) of a particular group is reduced "to just this demand, with its particular content" (Žižek 2008d:243). Our second argument for 'we', therefore, is that it allows for the symbolic efficiency and consistency necessary for grievances to 'go beyond' their particular group or individual expression, and towards something of a consistent collective appearance. This leads us to our third and final argument for collective identity, in that identifying in terms of 'we' allows an extension of the movement from a statement of particular grievances specific to a group (or individual) and towards a politics which is "at the same time stretching [that] statement into a question: and you[?]" (Holloway 2014:1072). Badiou, for instance, suggests that 'we' is an expression that has the potential to move beyond limited and isolated resistance, because it allows for "a transition from extension by imitation to qualitative extension" (2012:34). In

other words, rather than spreading by mimicry or repetition, a movement that expresses its identity in terms of 'we' can possibly extend in a more *meaningful* manner, permitting "a transition from the nihilistic din of riotous attacks to the intervention of a single slogan that envelopes all disparate voices" (Badiou 2012:35). Furthermore, Badiou also suggests that this qualitative extension has the potential to disrupt the distribution of the sensible, by going "beyond the bounds (of selfishness, competition and finitude...) set by individualism" (2010:234). As such, our third argument for 'we' is that it allows a meaningful extension of the movement's grievances beyond its particular setting, creating the basis for organising a collective politics that (in the Rancièrian sense) can challenge the common sense distribution of what counts as sensible appearance of those grievances (i.e. an individualised politics).

However, this argument for the establishment of collective identity or a 'we' (as the basis for organisation, symbolic efficiency and qualitative extension) nevertheless leaves the question of what actually constitutes this identity (which, for Occupy, was 'the 99%'). The speculative element of identifying in terms of 'we' is precisely that others have similar grievances to our own and that *our* experience of injustice, inequality and democratic deficit is not unique, but common with *the wider* experience of it. As such, 'the 99%' as the substantive element of Occupy's 'we' implies a post-crash universal identity which is shared by the vast majority of people and, as such, presupposes which grievances constitute that appearance. The potential problem, however, is that this risks precluding those who do not 'fit' into that identity from the outset by making one particular view of the movement dominant (at the expense of others).

Indeed, as Butler has argued, the problem with universal identity claims is that they risk presupposing that some particular essential characteristics or values that are shared by all those involved, which can then preclude people who do not fit into those presumptions *and yet 'should be' included*. In other words, for Butler, the establishment of a metaphorical universal identity (like 'the 99%') might hide a number of presuppositions that omit those who do not fit that identity (her example in *Gender Trouble* being the way in which 'woman' is often evoked as the universal identity for feminism, yet this not only excludes other genders and sexualities that should perhaps be part of a movement towards gender equality, but also presupposes a universal experience of identifying as a woman). Whilst agreeing that a universal identity "has its purposes", Butler therefore argues that it nevertheless "denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy of the term and constitutes itself through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that it simultaneously seeks to represent" (2006:194). By positing a universal subject as the basis for collective identity, a movement risks being pre-limited and foreclosed despite its claim to represent 'all' and, as such, while 'we are the 99%' appears to suggest *universal* grievances towards democracy and socio-economic inequality, this may problematically be based on a number of oversights as to the 'internal complexity' of those grievances.

In addition, the universal may also have implications for foreclosing political possibility, insofar as it accepts and extends the dominant distribution of the sensible as the basis of that identity. For example, using language very similar to Rancière, Butler writes that "discourse becomes oppressive when it requires the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of that opposition

– that is, take for granted the speaking subject’s own impossibility of unintelligibility” (Butler 2006:157), concluding that that ultimately “language has a dual possibility: it can be used to assert a true and inclusive universality of persons, or it can institute hierarchy in which only some persons are eligible to speak and others, *by virtue of exclusion from the universal point of view*, cannot speak without simultaneously de-authorising that speech” (2006:164 *emphasis added*). As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the distribution of sensible (authorised) and non-sensible (non-authorised) speech was clearly uneven within the identity of Occupy (in) London, where some – by virtue of their participation in pre-existing structures of power – were able to make themselves more visible and audible than others (leading to a disproportionate influence on the movement’s process and appearance).

Butler’s solution to these problems is that movements should therefore remain open to unforeseen possibility and contingencies in the present, arguing that “without the presupposition of a goal of unity, which is, in either case, always instituted at a conceptual level, *provisional unities* might emerge in the context of concrete actions that have purposes other than the articulation of identity” (2006:21 *emphasis added*). In other words, by avoiding the establishment of a universal identity in advance, it is Butler’s contention that new possibilities might emerge in the context of resistance and organisation itself, which otherwise might have been foreclosed by such an identity. She therefore argues against the “foundationalist reasoning of identity politics” which “tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, for political actions to be taken” suggesting, on the contrary, “that

there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’, but that the ‘doer’ is invariably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler 2006:195). This identity-in-becoming (as opposed to identity-via-preclusion) subsequently aims to emphasise the contingencies and possibilities of an event by staying open and aware to potentialities that might emerge in the context of resistance rather than risk closing them down in advance.

However, whilst this analysis might appear attractive in that it allows the possibility of political organisation without the need for potentially problematic preclusions, it raises a number of questions around *how* open, diverse or plural a movement can make itself, before sliding into disorganisation, symbolic inefficiency and qualitative limitation. If a movement needs to be completely open to whatever may (or may not) come about, then might this actually *prevent* the benefits of collectivity which we highlighted above? Indeed, as Žižek argues, such an open and porous style of organisation could foreclose the benefits of collective identity altogether, because it suggests that “political struggle proper is transformed into the cultural struggle for the recognition of marginal identities and the tolerance of difference” (2008d:263). Or as Dean puts it, “a politics that includes everything and everyone... in my view, this is not politics... politics involves division” (2006:xxl). In other words, it may well be the case that those exclusions which Butler seeks to avoid might actually be *necessary* as a constitutive outside to the collective and universal assertion of a movement’s identity, allowing for the collective organisation, symbolic consistency and qualitative extension highlighted above.

Indeed, it appears to be these potential limitations in Butler's argument that compelled her to clarify her position in the 1999 foreword to *Gender Trouble*, in which she appears to take a slightly different position on the universal:

"I have been compelled to revise some of my positions in *Gender Trouble* by virtue of my own political engagements. In the book, I tend to conceive of the claim of 'universality' in exclusively negative and exclusionary terms. However, I came to see the term has important strategic use precisely as a *non-substantial and open-ended* category... I came to understand how the assertion of universality can be *proleptic* and *performative*, conjuring a reality that does not yet exist, and holding out the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet been met." (2006:xviii *emphasis added*)

In this passage, therefore, Butler seems to argue that perhaps universality *does* do something important, in allowing a collective appearance and performance of grievances, as well as pre-empting opposition to that resistance in advance through an opening up of a collective imagination. Despite the risk of preclusion, therefore, it seems Butler is willing to accept universal claims which are 'non-substantial' and 'open-ended', because they might be useful for discerning possibility as part of an organised, symbolically consistent and qualitatively extended resistance.

Indeed, others who argue for the universalisation of claims have also suggested that the boundaries and limits of such identities need not be dogmatic or permanent. For instance, as Žižek has argued, the universal can "simultaneously open up and sustain the space for *questioning* these inclusions/exclusions, for renegotiating the limits of inclusion/exclusion as part of the ongoing ideologico-political struggle for hegemony" (2000:101). In other words, the exclusionary boundary created by universal identity statements can *itself* create and facilitate the space in which there is a subsequent negotiation and reflection upon that

exclusion. As such, this allows for a more *reflexive exclusion* which gives us the benefits of collective organisation, symbolic efficiency and qualitative extension, but without the preclusion of possibility that Butler warns us about.

In this section, I have argued that ‘we are the 99%’ (in the context of a reasserted post-crash neoliberalism) had the political potential to organise, present, and extend a collective identity around the post-crash issues of injustice, inequality and democratic deficit, by presenting them as universal grievances. As such, while Butler reminds us that the universal is (counter-intuitively) never as all-inclusive as it appears and is based on necessary lines of exclusion, I suggested that this does not mean movements should be fluid, porous and vague, nor that preclusion is even a necessary outcome. Instead, whilst moving in the direction of a *reflexively* exclusionary identity, it is suggested that Occupy (in) London had the potential to create an organised, consistent and extended resistance. However, as I will now argue in the next two sections, this possibility was foreclosed by a number of activist presuppositions, including distributions of individualism and libertarianism, as well as a prefigurative fetishisation that their resistance could be ‘open’ and take place ‘outside’ of the structures of contemporary society.

## **Individualism and libertarianism**

In this section, I argue that Occupy (in) London were ultimately unable to realise the collective and universal potential of ‘we are the 99%’ because of a number of presuppositions that persisted within the movement and foreclosed the possibility of an organised, symbolically consistent and qualitatively extended identity. To



begin with, these presuppositions can perhaps be demonstrated by two apparent slippages in the movement's self-identification. Firstly, the slogan 'we are the 99%' itself seemed to be somewhat interchangeable with the more individualised 'I am the 99%' and, whilst I clearly cannot say with any certainty that this inconsistency was anything more than trivial (or whether, for instance, an activist saying one thing didn't 'mean' the other), what this slippage nevertheless suggests is a certain discrepancy between Occupy as a collective and Occupy as an individualised identity project.

The second slippage is one that came about when Occupy LSX drafted their initial statement via General Assembly on the first day at St Paul's. Those who agreed to the statement, it seems, opted against using 'we are the 99%' in the text and instead identified themselves along open and pluralistic terms:

2. We are of all ethnicities, backgrounds, genders, generations, sexualities dis/abilities and faiths. We stand together with occupations all over the world. (Occupy London 2011)

This in turn suggests a certain tension between establishing an exclusive identity around 'the 99%' and a rival value of openness as a democratic end in-itself. While 'we are the 99%' was by no means absent in London, therefore, this slight difference in the initial statement suggests a conflict between the collective identity advocated in the previous chapter, and those who saw the movement as an endlessly loose and vague collection of individual identities. In this section, I will back up my reading of these apparent slippages by referring to the concerns expressed by those involved. I argue that they indicate interrelated issues of identity with the movement's organisation, symbolic consistency and qualitative

extension beyond their immediate protest, and that these benefits of collectivity and universality were therefore thwarted in advance by presuppositions of individualism and libertarianism.

By individualism, I mean that concept which has long been central in sociology and is used to describe the atomisation and fracturing in contemporary society, as well as the dissolution of the symbolic efficiency of collective identity categories towards more libertarian notions that emphasise *personal* freedom above those of the collective (see Beck 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Bauman 2000). In addition, however, it should be recognised that these are values which are ‘in all but name’ *neoliberal* values (see Gane 2012a) because they are describing the cultural impact of that distribution of the sensible which “now penetrates all aspects of both state and society which in turn are to normalise themselves to market principles” (Gane 2012b:632). In neoliberalism, principles of competition are advocated precisely in order to emphasise the autonomy and liberty of the individual, with the market meant to guarantee freedom on an individualised basis (rather than through potentially oppressive collective organisations like the state or the party).

It is problematic, therefore, that there were a number of people within Occupy (in) London who – despite aiming to resist the post-crash reassertion of neoliberalism – expressed values of individualism and saw the movement as an open group of multiple identities with ‘as many Occupys as there are occupiers’:

“It’s like, all down to *individual opinion*... but I think that gives us a *wider branch* like. Technically, we kind of spread across *every audience*. In a sense, like, we have ex-bankers who are here; we have my kind of age group (like the young people); and we have, like, the ‘older white male’; the ‘older

black male'; we have older women. We technically could branch out to pretty much anyone." (2012:5)

"This movement is not a properly organised advertisement of one idea. It's *everybody's idea and nobody's idea at the same time*. So it's a big pot; like a big soup. And I think it's more to show people that *we have something to say*." (2012:13)

This insistence that the base level of the movement's organisation should be 'individual opinion' (rather than anything collective), as well as the view that the movement was an endless stream of diverse individuals, seems to act in contradiction with the latter activist's claim that the movement is a 'we' with 'something to say'. If the movement is simultaneously everybody and nobody's idea; then what constitutes that 'we' and how could they decide collectively on 'something to say'?

Another occupier, who also seemed to adopt this individualist streak within Occupy (in) London, continued this theme by arguing that the movement's core message was that people should be individually free to do what they want and that their activism should be seen as a 'trend' or 'wave' which could offer one cultural choice amongst others:

"I think people should *wear whatever they want*, right? Look like they want, right? I like to think that we're breaking down these stereotypes, like you know: 'you look like this, you look like that'. I remember when the punk rockers in the 70's first appeared, people used to say: 'god, look at ya!' You know, they used to wear kilts and very colourful and their hair was done up. I was living in King's Cross which was a centre for punk rockers and it was fantastic living with them. It's a 'new wave' right? And *I think Occupy is part of a new wave*, right? That's going around the world. And hopefully music and the new culture will come out of this, something that will last for generations." (2012:8)

As I will argue in the next chapter, it is not coincidental that this sounds so close to the values expressed by the sixties counter-culture and icons like Jerry Rubin who is alleged to have claimed that ‘people should just do whatever the fuck they want’.

As Hall and Jefferson point out, however, this is not as radical as it might seem, and is instead indicative of “the new individualism of ‘do your own thing’, [which] when taken to its logical extremes, seemed like nothing so much as a loony caricature of petit-bourgeois individualism of the most residual and traditional kind” (2006:53).

The immediate problem with such residual individualism within the movement, therefore, is that it forecloses the possibilities of collective organisation, symbolic consistency and qualitative extension (which we outlined in the previous section) by undermining the collective and universal identities which can facilitate these possibilities. For instance, for some activists, the stubbornness and pettiness that appeared to come with such individualism seemed to directly prevent a number of organisational and pragmatic decisions from being made:

“We had a second round of funding which... it was in the middle of this big fight and this guy said: ‘well, if [he] is involved, I’m blocking it!’ It was five grand which we could have done a lot from. But we didn’t do it because of an *internal scrap*. So the problem is not with money, the problem is with us *not taking the opportunities which are presented to us* because of rather *petty internal politics*.” (2013:3)

“*Diversity is difficult*. It’s difficult because... it’s important (and I’m really up for diversity) but it’s also quite hard at times to make things happen. Because people will take their opinion of, like: ‘*but this is me* and I don’t want to go further than that, and *I don’t want to sometimes compromise...*’ And I think it’s because we were born into a society like that... very *individualistic*.” (2013:10)

“Anything that tries to be a horizontal movement is going to give rise to people riffing a bit louder and constructing a narrative out of it or *manipulating it for different ends*. Because there are obviously a lot of different *political factions*... you’d be having a general assembly on, you

know, the problem of food at St Paul's or food donation... and it would get hijacked by someone saying: 'you know, we should all be supporting the Socialist Worker Party!' Or something like that... So in terms of its *definition* there was totally this *clash of interests*." (2014:4)

What these three activists focus on, then, are certain practical and organisational implications of individualism within the movement: preventing funding because of personal rifts; preventing any negotiation or compromise necessary for collective decisions; as well as preventing discussions and debate over basic organisational problems, because someone would 'hijack' the conversations for their own political interests. What's more, for the latter two activists in particular, there was an explicit link to be drawn between this problem and the wider social context of the movement, ultimately concluding that they had been foreclosed by wider distributions of individualistic values.

Rather than collective organisation, therefore, many activists described a fracturing and divisiveness within the movement and reflected back upon Occupy's disorganisation with a certain amount of remorse and regret for (what they saw) as a lost opportunity:

"I'm pretty sure that people in Occupy have gravitated towards each other in little *cliques*, and two years on they have... people have stayed together in certain little *sections*." (2014:5)

"I don't know what *Daily Mail* readers think about when they hear the name 'Occupy'... when I hear it, it arouses very contradictory emotions because it was so *impotent* in some ways. As a great big movement that *fractured* so quickly, it was such a microcosm of... all the stupidity of human beings came out in Occupy. All the really stupid *fractionalisation* and *finger-pointing* and *pettiness*." (2014:7)

"It became more a *battle of personal identities and personal wills* really." (2014:8)

“I do think that what we’re trying is extremely ambitious. I feel like, although we’re trying to be enlightened and everyone work together.... Blah blah blah... I don’t think you’ll find a bunch of people who are more *egotistical*! We have such big egos that we don’t even need money because having our egos fed is all we do this for! And our egos are the size that we think we can change the world! That takes a fucking big ego, right?!” (2014:10)

From the gravitational pull of individuals into cliques, to the finger-pointing and pettiness of personal identities, to the apparently egotistical nature of activism: what these activists suggest is a level of foreclosure of the possibility of collective organisation by the presupposition of wider societal distributions of individualism.

As well as this collective disorganisation, however, individualism also appeared to undermine the symbolic efficiency of the movement, in that Occupy (in) London seemed to adopt an incoherent and inconsistent identity (making them appear vague and unstructured). As a result, such in-fighting and fracturing around tensions of identity suggested a certain symbolic *inefficiency*:

“I think Occupy has sparked off a lot of different groups and you get people saying they’re ‘Occupy’... but then other people within the movement will go: ‘No! You’re not Occupy!’... and then other people again will go: ‘No! You’re not allowed to say that!’ Or ‘No! You’re not...’ You know?” (2012:11)

“When you have that umbrella name of ‘Occupy London’ that was going to mediate on behalf of the two camps, you’re suddenly taking all the space between those two camps as well. I mean, if it was Occupy *City* of London, it would mean Cheapside and Moorgate were not part of that... but it was Occupy *London*.” (2014:5)

“Someone friendly who has been involved in the past said: ‘Oh, how’s things going with Occupy London?’ and one of the people on our team said: ‘I don’t have anything to do with ‘Occupy London’. And the way she was using the term was a little group of people – 6 people or something – who she’d had a *personal spat* with (with her group of 6 or 10 people). From outside of those two groups, that was just a completely mindless thing... *people outside are asking about Occupy London not Occupy London ‘TM’; but she was so buried in her own little thing...* and that’s kind of when I gave up

hope.” (2014:7)

Which groups could and could not legitimately appear under the universal signifier of ‘Occupy London’ became a matter of contention and division within the movement, with no clear way to recognise who was included and excluded from that identity. As such, this created a certain loss in their symbolic efficiency, because it weakened the consistency of the movement’s aesthetic appearance and reduced their ability to make a meaningful extension beyond the movement itself.

Social media in particular, it seems, exasperated the undisciplined nature of the movement’s collective appearance, as such “neoliberal technologies of the self” (Mirowski 2011:328) did not lend themselves to a negotiation over collective identity, but instead allowed individuals to put across their *own* views with the full symbolic weight and authority of appearing to represent the movement as a whole. In particular, the main *Twitter* feeds (‘@occupylondon’ and ‘@occupylsx’); domain names (e.g. ‘occupylondon.co.uk’ or ‘occupy.london’); and the main hashtags (a select number of people, I discovered, were able to broadcast their personal tweets on the main account using the hashtag #occupylsx), all appeared to be the movement as a collective, but were actually only administrated by particular groups or individuals.

On one particular occasion, this online tension between individualism and collectivity was brought to the fore by a tweet sent by ‘The Occupied Times’ *Twitter* account that criticised *Wikileaks*’ founder Julian Assange on the basis of (since dropped) rape allegations towards him. The controversial tweet, however, not only

lost the feed half of its followers, but led a number of people to actually quit the working group in protest:

“Like, we had a real problem with *Twitter*, because one geezer from our gang – Occupied Times – used the name, he said... well, it was when Julian Assange still went into the Ecuadorean embassy and some people, some occupiers, were in favour of him, supported him (I thought he was alright, I didn’t have any strong views). But some guy from The Occupied Times just had a real issue with him and used... made a really stupid comment on *Twitter* about that: ‘we at The Occupied Times are not rape apologists’. And you know, with *Twitter*, you’ve got about 121 characters and you can do it in 20 seconds... and we lost half our hits in one day. You know, that was kind of the beginning of the end really, when I look back at it.” (2013:3)

Furthermore, this issue with social media became even more problematic in the post-eviction movement, when online forums such as *Twitter* became Occupy’s main platform of public appearance. As such, because of pervasive individualism, the movement seemed to have become divided, conflicted and unable to achieve a collective consistent appearance.

As has been argued by Žižek, however, such undisciplined and fluid individualised identities are also problematic because they are conducive to contemporary consumer capitalism which “provides the very background and terrain for the emergence of shifting-dispersed-contingent-ironic and so on, political subjectivities” (2000:108). This point has also been echoed by others, such as Laclau, who also argues that “the abandonment of global strategic perspectives [suggests] an unconscious acceptance of the dominant logics of the system” (2000:62). In other words, an emphasis on individual identities over collective ones is *not* disruptive of the market norms of neoliberal capitalist society and, therefore, individualism can be shown to have “detrimental effects, hindering the movement’s



ability to take a strong stand against capitalism” because of the “emphasis on plurality and inclusivity... prevalent in movement rhetoric... merges seamlessly into communicative capitalism” (Dean 2012:222). Furthermore, as Dean’s critique of social media as communicative capitalism (which I introduced in the previous chapter) also suggests, such an individualised approach to identity indicates “the materialisation of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance intensify global capitalism” (2009:2) precisely because they both fetishise “speech, opinion and participation” (2009:17).

On the other hand, this aversion to collective identities not only indicates a foreclosure by distributions of *individualism*, but also related attitudes of *libertarianism*, by which I mean an emphasis on the sanctity of individual freedom and autonomy *coupled with* a paranoia and cynicism towards collectivities or universalities which are prejudged as necessarily limiting that liberty. For example, one major question within Occupy (in) London was whether or not they should adopt the (media-designated) characterisation of being an ‘anti-capitalist’ movement. Whilst some individuals were in favour of accepting this identity and saw this as a fundamental part of their resistance; others insisted that – because they *personally* did not identify as ‘anti-capitalist’ – the movement as a whole should avoid this signifier:

“There was a really defining point early on when there was this banner in the camps which said ‘Capitalism is Crisis’ (which I think was inherited from Climate Camp, that banner) and I think this kind of represented the *anti-capitalist sentiment* that was there. But obviously, because there were many people involved with other sentiments as well, *softer sentiments*, who wanted to work *with* state or local authorities... And this banner got

removed and I think this *redefined the movement a little bit in softer terms*, which I think *fed into its progression and led to a lot of divides* and stuff. This is one moment in the history of Occupy London that many people think marks a divide of many of the people that were involved.” (2014:4)

“This is the problem: ‘we are the 99%’ ... but *the 99% don’t agree* on what needs to be done to overcome the 1%. The very least is to *agree to have lots of different ways to oppose the 1%*... but that wasn’t something that was kind of suggested.” (2014:5)

“We need to appreciate that there are going to be people with widely different theoretical and practical views as to how to challenge the state and capitalism. Occupy London may have mentioned the words ‘anti-capitalism’ a couple of times... but *it really wasn’t an anti-capitalist movement*. So people like me – who slowly over time became more about: ‘hey, actually *there’s this great ringing thing called ‘capitalism’ and we’re not challenging it*’ – we were kind of *excluded* from that... because ‘we’re not with this idea of being a unified inclusive movement that was being controlled by a certain group and a few identities’.” (2014:8)

Even something as general, wide-reaching, vague and open to interpretation as the signifier ‘anti-capitalist’ was therefore seen as too restrictive on individual identities for the movement to consolidate around. Indeed, for these occupiers, the decision not to accept this categorisation precisely demonstrated the problems with division and fracturing within the movement, yet this was a notion supported (as the last activist suggests) by the fear that they would be ‘controlled’ if they accepted such a collective identity.

Others also expressed libertarian fears of collective identity through a straightforward rejection of *any* universal signifiers which might discipline or limit their individual identity in any way:

“To be honest, I haven’t got any political kind of viewpoint... I think that, I am not a socialist, I’m not a communist, I’m none of that... I just don’t agree with *it*. I think we need a new *thing*... I just don’t agree with any of it.” (2012:4)

“Not everyone in the movement will label themselves as ‘anti-capitalist’ and also, I think, fundamentally saying that ‘we’re anti-capitalists’ *de-enfranchises* a lot of people.” (2012:11)

“So we have been described as ‘anti-capitalist’ protestors... Personally, I’m *not* anti-capitalist. But I believe there are flaws in the system and those are those which *personally* I am addressing.” (2012:12)

Seeking to deny any affiliation with a collective signifier, emphasising the protection of individuals within the movement who might not want to conform to universal labels, as well as simply stating one’s *personal* grievances, all therefore suggest a prevailing libertarianism within Occupy (in) London. Seeking to protect the sanctity and agency of the individual against having to compromise or be excluded from any collective identity, any umbrella names – such as ‘anti-capitalism’ or ‘Occupy London’ – were denied by those who saw them as limiting, coercive, oppressive, or disciplinary, instead aiming to precisely avoid such conformity. In addition, this may have had implications for the qualitative extension of the movement, in that the possibility was no longer open for the activists to make Holloway’s speculative ‘and you?’ jump from their particular grievances to others. By pre-empting collective and universal signifiers as necessarily suspicious and to be avoided, this therefore limited the movement’s identity and grievances from being meaningfully extended past their particular expression.

It is problematic, therefore, that the individualism and libertarianism of wider society seemed to be reiterated and extended into the movement, presenting foreclosures of the collective organisation, symbolic efficiency and qualitative extension which ‘we are the 99%’ sought to establish. As such, for those who

recognised these problems within the movement, the presupposition of these values represented the inability of Occupy (in) London to effectively resist:

“Like, the thing that struck me is the amount of people that will say: ‘yeah, we know capitalism’s flawed, but what’s the alternative?’ You don’t have to convince them its flawed (they *know* it’s flawed) it’s just: ‘what’s the alternative?’ And when you say: ‘well, we’re not here to say we’ve got an alternative, we’re here to say, look, *can we find an alternative* then? You know? And then you talk to us, we talk to you, everyone talks to each other... it’s not like *we* have the answer!’ And some people get that... but then they lost it really quickly because... I don’t know if it’s something to do with human nature, or if you can say *it’s consumeristic culture*, but certain people talk about it like they’re going to change their electric or gas supplier! It’s like: ‘so, what’s your *rate*? What’s your *policy*? Yeah, ok I’m behind you, yeah yeah...’ Like, fucking, *completely consumeristically!*” (2012:3)

“I mean, I never heard of this ‘Deleuze and Guattari’ (everyone’s namedropping them at the moment). And it’s like: ‘yeah, it’s all about *not defining* and just being really *fluid*.’ It’s like this is just an apologist... *an apology for a lack of commitment*, you know? No surprise that people within a recession are using them as a crutch and not committed as much to the movement as you’d wish. In fact, the irony is, *they’re there doing lectures on the definition of people who said: ‘let’s not be defined!’*” (2012:7)

“The whole post-modernist nonsense has driven the overwhelming majority of people into *hedonism*. So the majority of people are very *reactionary*. They neither want to see change, believe that change is possible – or even desirable – and *they don’t want to be told what to do about anything*. Now, in a way, that *libertarian narcissistic approach* has historical strands within some forms of *anarchism*. And therefore people are very very reluctant, it would seem, within the progressive political groupings, to *commit to anything*. Now, in a way, that’s a strength because people don’t trust leaders of any description; but still *people aren’t going to join up to things...* that is a fantastic weakness and strength.” (2013:7)

For the first activist, the problem was a ‘consumeristic attitude’ by which he seems to mean a kind of shallow or lazy interpassive approach to politics that allows others to do the work on their behalf. For the second, the problem was a lack of definition and an emphasis on fluidity seeming to reduce the commitment or

fidelity of people to collective causes. And finally, the third activist sees this lack of commitment as suggesting a certain ‘hedonism’ and a ‘libertarian narcissistic approach’ (with parallels in anarchism), which they also see preventing the extension of the movement as ‘people aren’t going to join up to things’.

What these more critical activists are suggesting, then, is precisely a problematic foreclosure of the movement by persisting values of individualism and libertarianism:

“I think Occupy is a bit of... not really *defined* itself properly. And I think that the potential it’s got is quite good and I think that all this other... the *impression it gives the public* is probably not a very good one.” (2012:2)

“There’s this whole kind of slow process of actually learning about everyone’s backgrounds and sort of getting together on our *common goals* – what *we* want; the *common causes* – the *causes bring us together*.” (2012:16)

“Towards the end of Occupy I was saying: ‘you’ve got to get your *identity* right first...’ You work out who’s ‘in’ (*whatever ‘in’ is*) then, once you’ve worked out who is ‘in’, those people can decide the process that is being used. It doesn’t have to be written down, it can be done very *organically*. Then, once you’ve decided process, you can decide on things like finance (how we spend our money *depends* on that organic use)...” (2014:5)

“Well, the contention over what *is* Occupy London, I think, is a complete red herring. I mean, every badge I’ve got says ‘Occupy’ – it doesn’t say anything about ‘Occupy London’ or ‘Occupy LSX’ – and I think the single word ‘Occupy’ is the *resonant word*.” (2014:12)

The lack of collective identity meant a lack of symbolic efficiency and consistency in the movement’s appearance, unable to give the public a ‘good impression’ because the movement had failed to ‘define itself’ and therefore lacked the ability to ‘resonate’ beyond their particular appearance.

In this section, it has been my aim to highlight some of the complex and interwoven tensions around questions of identity by looking at issues of individualism and libertarianism. Problematically, because so many within the movement persisted in emphasising these values, I argue that they remained foreclosed by the post-crash distribution of the sensible which subsequently limited their ability to *challenge* those presupposed norms. Or, as Dean writes, it was a mistake for Occupy “to emphasise individuality” because this not only “is to misunderstand the common at the heart of the movement” and it also “reinserts the movement within the dominant culture, as if occupation were a choice like any other” (Dean 2011:91). In other words, Occupy (in) London were ultimately unable to realise the collective potential of ‘we are the 99%’ because of the way in which they approached the movement’s organisation and symbolic identity, remaining limited by a wider societal “transition from a representation of social relations in terms of *collectives*... to an *individualising* representation” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007:185) in which “emphasis is placed on values of autonomy and self-fulfilment” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007:422).

## **Prefiguration and the 99%**

In this section, I will build upon the foreclosures of collective possibility already highlighted, by pointing towards a further potential limitation of resistance through the presupposition of ‘prefiguration’. As has been already mentioned, Occupy’s experiment into a more equal, inclusive and structureless democratic organisation was meant to be more than simply a protest; but also a performance, enactment

and anticipation of the sort of society that they wanted to bring about. In other words, to quote an often repeated phrase within the movement, the occupiers were attempting to take seriously Ghandi's advice to 'be the change you want to see in the world' by enacting and experimenting with that change within the movement itself. However, as I will now argue, such a fetishisation of openness and outside-ness as democratic ends in-themselves, ultimately led to a non-reflexivity upon unequal distributions that persisted within the movement's collective appearance.

For instance, a fetishisation of openness as a democratic end in-itself became evident in activist expressions of inclusiveness, which was often evoked as evidence for the movement's prefiguration of a more democratic society (in that anyone and everyone within or without the General Assembly could, in theory, have their say or make their grievances sensible):

"Occupy is not standing behind one single issue, its standing behind overall corruption and deception and non-transparency, so it doesn't care... Occupy's not caring what it's looking at, *it's looking at everything*, so *everyone and anyone* can bring information to Occupy and find some groups... some focus groups." (2012:9)

"Occupy is a movement of ideas. And if someone gave you a description, Occupy is a movement of ideas. *No one can speak on behalf of Occupy; no person can represent Occupy...* 'cause you see some people who have been at St Paul's have been asking us to vote for a candidate, but *we're not a political party*. No one can represent Occupy. Occupy is a movement, it's an idea that's completely abstract. So basically, it does not exist... *anyone can claim to be an occupier.*" (2012:12)

"But I mean one of the *strengths* of Occupy was the diversity of voices and the diversity of opinion. You know when we did a survey about two weeks in, only about 30% of people said they were 'anti-capitalist' and if you ask people by what they mean by 'anti-capitalist' or 'capitalist' or 'Marxist'... *its 360 degrees of the mountain* (up to a point) all over again." (2013:2)

The openness of the movement, where there was to be ‘no single issue’ and instead the movement could look at ‘everything and anyone’, was taken to be a democratic end in-itself. Indeed, as the second activist boasts, no-one could speak on behalf of the movement and anyone could claim to be an occupier (a porousness and fluidity which he directly compares with the perceived limitations of more solid collectivities like political parties). Indeed, this lack of discipline was seen to be one of the strengths of the Occupy movement, repeating the values of individualism and libertarianism from the previous section, but also suggesting something more: the perceived need to prefigure an open and inclusive organisation.

It is argued here, however, that the very fetishisation of Occupy (in) London as an open movement created an organisation which not only reproduced unequal distributions, but was ultimately unable to address or negotiate the inevitable boundaries of exclusion from the movement’s identity. For instance, despite seeing the GA as an inclusive and structureless space, legitimate appearance and authoritative voice remained unevenly distributed within discussions. Or, as one activist described it, there was a problem of fetishizing ‘inclusivity for the sake of it’:

“We were very good at the beginning of Occupy LSX of having a lot of wide representation with a lot of different people. You just have to see and look back at the photographs and you can see all sorts of people: people of colour, white people, different genders... so on and so forth. It didn’t really happen, so to speak, when it transitions to ‘Occupy London’. The movement was slowly dwindling in London and *what you were left with was almost the very middle-class cis-gendered type of environment*. And I don’t know whether that... I can’t judge the intentions as to where that’s an intentional thing, whether they were just people who remained with Occupy London, and though it still had some legs to stand on... but sadly that’s how it turned out.” (2014:8)

“In terms of this idea of ‘the 99%’ that Occupy Wall Street (and a lot of other Occupies in the Middle East) has... *I think we fall foul of this idea of*



*inclusivity for the sake of it.* I think that's probably one of the main problems of Occupy London. Again, although it's *espousing great rhetoric*, perhaps in practice it was doomed to fail really, because *we were too inclusive* and we weren't equipped to deal with people from all sorts of backgrounds (people who perhaps had serious 'madness problems'... mental health problems). We weren't equipped to deal with that. And I think this idea of *inclusivity and diversity as well was a bit of a misnomer* for Occupy London. It's a great idea to join and have this *intersectional idea of class, gender, race and...* you know, whatever else. But it really didn't turn out. That wasn't really the practice of Occupy London, unfortunately." (2014:8)

By fetishizing their openness, Occupy (in) London was unable to reflect upon its organisation and unintentionally ended up precluding certain people from the movement, whilst inadvertently creating an unequal distribution along the lines of pre-established social structures (creating the 'middle-class cis-gendered type of environment' from the first quote). Counter-intuitively, therefore, Occupy's fetishism of openness not only prevented the structurelessness they were hoping to prefigure, but created a space that actual *foreclosed* the possibility of equal negotiation of their collective appearance.

In other words, the ideal of openness as a democratic end in-itself seemed to be contradicted in practice. For instance, a number of people still appeared to have an idea of the 'type of person' who 'belonged' to the movement (as well as the type of person who did not belong):

"Occupy... I saw it on the news and like so many other things, I thought: 'wow, yeah, I should go down and check it out!' And then I probably never would have done it, but my cousin said to me: 'I'm really surprised at you, I thought you'd be there?' And I kind of thought: 'Fuck yeah! I should go down and check it out!'" (2012:3)

"Che Guevara t-shirts man! They make me laugh! You know, it's this whole: 'oh, it's cool to be left wing' thing. That sort of thing does my head in, y'know? Those people, they're not into any *cause*, they just want to be part

of the ‘gang’. And people like that, in my opinion, should just be *avoided*.” (2012:10)

*Do you think there’s such thing as an ‘activist identity’?*

“It’s not that I’m second guessing you, but when I hear questions like that... I kind of feel like people search for excuses not to do things, y’know? Now, yes, there are some people who have *that identity*, and people also... in a way, a lot of the people who are more into that identity are more into it than formulating a more sophisticated critique. So it’s *fashion* really. And it’s not totally superficial, but it is in a way a fashion that appeals to certain people who I imagine are *jobless* a lot of the time, or *creative*, and it’s an avenue for them to *express themselves*. I’ve never really had a problem with that, but I’ve been a part of that, so I’ve never been intimidated by it. Doubly so, I’ve never needed to put it down. It’s generally people trying to do the right thing and bonding *human cliques*... it’s very ordinary.” (2014:10)

While these activists give quite different accounts, they nevertheless all appear to point towards a distribution of the sensible within the movement of the ‘type of person’ that would or would not belong to it. For the first, whilst considering joining Occupy (in) London when he first saw it reported on mainstream media, it was only when his cousin challenged his identity as someone who ‘should be’ involved that he actually acted upon it. The concern for the others, however, was more about the sort of person who should *not* be included, seeing these people as more ‘inauthentic’ activists (see chapter 5) and tied to fashion or facetious concerns with being ‘cool’. In addition, however, it is interesting that my asking about an ‘activist identity’ made the third activist actually quite defensive (seeing this as an attempt to attack the movement or dismiss it as trivial non-sense) launching her towards a steady outline of ‘some people’ who might have that identity, whereas the majority did not.

Another activist also appeared to have an idea of the type of person who – even *within* the movement – did not really belong to Occupy and should not really be included:

“In Occupy it was so obvious... because Anonymous is a very diverse group (anyone can call themselves ‘Anonymous’) and then there’s this *really good part* of Anonymous that are like the hackers and doing a really good job. And then just like a bunch of people that are really *just trying to create trouble*. And they are really confrontational. *They don’t have strong politics*. They’re lost really, *they don’t know what they’re doing*. And then they really just like *pose* with the mask to the camera, so they would just stand there... But in the camp, there was never any energy given to them to improve, or to participate with what’s going on, they would never engage with us. They would just sit there in the tent with the flag waving around and as soon as the media arrived they were like posing. But they never *worked* for it, they didn’t *believe* in the idea. And I think there’s a problem within activist circles sometimes and more mass movements (like Occupy was at some point) are that people become... They’re maybe more, like, *excluded* from society, and they see social movements as: ‘be part of something like a community’. Because activist groups are like that, you don’t just go to your protests then go home, there is a sense of *family*, *we’re* really really close to each other, *we* support each other in our everyday life. And I think *people are really attracted to that... but maybe don’t engage in the politics so much* (and that’s really like a massive problem).” (2013:10)

The criticism here is of the perceived instrumentalism of some activists who are thought to be using the movement either for egotistical identity projects – such as the Anonymous group posing for the camera, but not taking part in the movement’s process – or simply being excluded from society and therefore looking for something to belong to. Indeed, in an individualised society with declined symbolic efficiency, social movements are likely to be a key source of identity, belonging and community support which is in short supply elsewhere. Yet, for this activist, this meant activists that were ‘less political’ than others or simply there ‘for the wrong reasons’ (to cause trouble or shy away from work).

Such aesthetic lines and identity boundaries were also expressed in terms of consumer preferences and, while I will return to this in the next chapter, here I want to simply reiterate the divisions and preclusions which were based on such conspicuous consumption, in that they were seen to presuppose the type of person who could belong to the movement:

“I guess you’d call me part of the ‘alternative spectrum’ (although I don’t know how actually meaningful that word is anymore... *I think the ‘alternative’ really has become ‘mainstream’*). But if you go back to the early 90’s/00’s I was... I suppose you could call me a ‘grunger’. I used to have hair down to here!” (2012:15)

“With anarchists, army surplus is very popular because it’s cheap and very hard wearing. So this creates an *identity* by itself as well... It’s always the case when they say ‘bunch of crusties’ – ‘get your hair cut you bunch of hippies’ – unfortunately, you just don’t have a choice sometimes.” (2014:2)

“I’ve seen the people... the German occupiers looked *exactly* like Finsbury Square, for example, the same lingo, the same movements, the same... every bit of small detail was the same. Like they’ve created some kind of *subculture*... the way they rolled their joints, the way they were talking...” (2014:6)

“But I’m wearing black and red and I look like I’ve just stepped out of Camden... I *have* just stepped out of Camden... I bought this hat in Camden, I’ve got dreads... and certain people will look at me and... It’s all uniforms; that’s the way identity works.” (2014:9)

A certain activist identity therefore seems to be captured in these tastes for the ‘alternative spectrum’ (which are, of course, stereotypes of the type of people who get involved in such movements: long hair, army surplus clothes, certain lingo, or choice in drugs). In particular, the second activist’s insistence that these were pragmatic rather than stylistic decisions (with army surplus being hard-wearing and unwashed hair being a by-product of living in the streets) was interesting, because

this suggested a certain self-conscious attempt to make the movement seem less trivial.

What this presupposed identity suggests overall, however, is that Occupy (in) London were ultimately unable to achieve an open space in practice. Indeed, even the mechanisms used in the general assembly which were meant to facilitate such horizontality and inclusivity by giving each an equal chance to speak or appear, were seen by some as creating unintentional preclusions:

“In Occupy we have *jargon* – we talk about ‘working groups’; we talk about ‘general assemblies’ – every group has its own jargon, and that jargon *makes us feel part of the group* but it also *excludes* other people.” (2013:4)

“But I think it’s also true to say that that kind of camp – and having those kinds of meetings where everyone was doing ‘wavy hands’ and all the rest of it – I think it appeals to some and *feels exclusive to others*. And it’s not like everybody had dreadlocks at Occupy, but nonetheless... that exclusivity thing was one of the fundamental tensions of Occupy. *A circle which is very inclusive to those in it can feel very exclusive to those outside it.*” (2014:3)

“Activism is theatre and activism is about attracting energy and being entertaining... and, if you’re going to do something in a public space and attract people in, then you have to put up a tent, a stage, logos... it’s all *identity and iconography*. And the problem is, when you start talking about ‘finance’ and long drawn-out decisions in public space, then people walk away (and we saw that at the end).” (2014:9)

“The need to *belong* and then *identify* with what you belong to... I’m sure there are sections... I mean, I know there are because I was on both the Finance Working Group and the Process Working Group (both of whom were roundly disliked and both of which were considered to ‘control’ the movement). Where, in fact, most of us on it thought quite the reverse, that we were serving the movement, that it was quite a thankless task, painstaking job with quite a lot of responsibility. Its fine, I don’t mind about it, but it’s the opposite of taking control of things... it was trying to get things into some sort of *coherence that people could gather around.*” (2014:12)

The very mechanisms that were supposed to pre-figure and enact an open and unconditional inclusion therefore seemed unable to facilitate such ends because (in

order to establish a recognisable collective appearance) the movement inevitably drew exclusionary boundaries around such rituals. As these activists suggest, every group has its own language, its own processes, its own mundane decisions to make, its own iconography and symbolism, and its own division of labour, which inevitably draw divisions between those included and those who are not.

Subsequently, while those who felt that they belonged to Occupy (in) London celebrated the openness of their movement, others felt excluded from that appearance. For instance, those not from an 'activist background', simply did not feel that they were designated an equal position within the GA:

"So many conflicts emerged within Occupy and so many *rivalries* and so many people wouldn't work together anymore. I kind of think one of the biggest problems is that we should have participated much more with Occupy [LSX] and I think the reason many of us didn't is because *we didn't come from an activist background* and it was *dominated by some of the bigger characters and personalities* that were involved in the movement – who were often very good, open-minded people – but at the same time, there was this *hierarchical relationship* around these characters and these figureheads that *drew the movement away* from being this kind of *horizontal autonomous model it should have been.*" (2014:4)

"There definitely was a difference at the time, but I can't work out whether or not these people looked *different to me from a kind of working class background*, where I like my Burberry, I like my brands. That's changed slowly... but at that point in 2011 when I was someone new coming to these kind of political organisations, you could see the people were of a *particular type*. It's going to sound very stereotypical (and I don't mean it to) but the very loose clothes, no branding, a lot of sandals and baggy trousers... but I can't really over-generalise on that point because there were people there that resembled someone who you wouldn't have thought to have been a devout anarchist or a devout Marxist. People with jeans, sunglasses..." (2014:8)

"At the time, when we were transitioning from 'Occupy LSX' to 'Occupy London'... a lot of us felt that we weren't being heard or that our views were being excluded and started to break off to have our own meetings about

*process: how the hell do we fix consensus?... so on and so forth...*" (2014:8)

On the one hand, because they were from an activist background, some identities seemed distributed as possessing a certain authority or disproportionate sway over the movement's identity and appearance. Leaving, on the other hand, others who felt precluded or unequal due their identity or tastes (such as Burberry).

As such, this directly contradicted the purpose of the GA, which was precisely to prefigure an alternative democratic organisation and open up their appearance to more stakeholders, creating a horizontal space in which 'the 99%' had equal opportunity to participate in a collective appearance and towards making their grievances sensible. Indeed, this was an idea expressed by a number of activists:

*"Occupy has been reforming the reclaiming of that right... so the right to public space; the right to free assembly; the right to actually have a say in decisions now made... because it's been working within this consensus-based democracy so basically everyone has to agree... Some people I've spoken to have said that Occupy is a bit like street theatre and it is. But at the same time, it's not just theatre, it's very real. It is a performing of an alternative, it becomes your life and so you sort of... it does profoundly change the way you are in the world and that's a really interesting thing."* (2012:11)

*"To me, as I was saying before, public space is so importance. And to me, creating that is so visual to the public, it's something that you can't hide. Let's say now, we're here in a square, nobody knows about it unless they know someone here or walking by... but if you're really in the centre of a city and you're camping there and talking about issues... they can't ignore you anymore, y'know? And obviously, because it was such a great diversity of people, it wasn't anymore (oh you know) the black-hooded anarchists throwing bricks at everything and they don't care about... It was such a diversity: from middle-class people, to working-class people, many issues we wanted to highlight. And the timing was really right, this moment when the crisis was starting to feel really strong for the first time, so people really felt... so yeah, I guess the combination of the crisis and the diversity of people that attended the event made it really really something... then obviously the use of space to highlight those issues."* (2013:10)

“I looked at [Occupy] as an *experiment* that I’d never seen before. I’d never seen a *space that was completely isolated from this system, from this world that we’re forced to live in*. No politician, no policemen, could ruin there... we had to handle everything ourselves. That was interesting. Every time you set up a community, *habits and issues come up that you’ve brought in from the outside worlds* and if you resolve it, *then you resolve it in the whole of society*.” (2014:6)

The combination of occupying space, openness and horizontality, was therefore seen as enacting an alternative aesthetic appearance that ‘becomes your life’ and changes the way ‘you are in the world’. For these activists, the movement was therefore meant as a political performance and embodiment of a democracy which was seen as non-existent in neoliberal parliamentary governance (particularly after the crash). What’s more, and for the last activist in particular, Occupy (in) London was also understood as a unique experiment which was ‘isolated’ from the wider context, or an autonomous space which could not only exist outside of the control of politicians and police, but could solve the problems and issues brought into the movement and, by doing so, could solve these problems in the rest of society.

This therefore leads us beyond the fetishisation of openness towards a related prefigurative emphasis on *outside-ness*. The idea that the movement were somehow able to adopt a space outside of wider structures and distributions, I argue, led to a counter-intuitive foreclosure of their ability to reflect on their continued complicity with them. Indeed, it is uncanny how close the idea that Occupy (in) London were able to create a structureless space comes to Jo Freeman’s idea of the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’. In her discussion of another group who, like Occupy, sought to create a horizontal organisation, Freeman begins with the contention that there is “no such thing as a structureless group”, before



arguing that very idea that one could exist actually acts as a smokescreen for “unquestioned hegemony” (2013:232). As such, the suggestion that there were simply no structures of power and that Occupy had been able to establish a space outside of wider social distributions, created a tendency to overlook those structures which *did* persist within the movement. As Freeman writes, “when informal elites are combined with a myth of structurelessness there can be no attempt to put limits on their use of power... it becomes capricious” (2013:237) or, as one activist put this idea, the paradox is “you can tell who the leaders are, they’re the ones going around saying there is no leaders!” (2012:7).

In other words, the oversight of the movement’s continued complicity with these distributions meant that some continued to possess ‘sensible’ appearance and voice above others. As such, this meant that any negotiation over the movement’s collective appearance, was “all too often smothered beneath the frenetic urgency of actions, by the sheer momentum of our inherited structures of oppression, and silenced by loud chauvinist voices who took up too much space” (Maharawal 2013:180). The tyranny of structurelessness was therefore one that left the distribution of the sensible within the movement unchecked, allowing wider inequalities – such as class privilege, patriarchy and whiteness – to persist and maintain positions of authority over the movement’s appearance.

A certain socio-economic class inequality within the movement, for example, can perhaps most easily spotted in discussions around the effect of ‘education’ or ‘expertise’ (which echoed the Althusserian-style authority claims from the second chapter). Self-professed experts on social movements, resistance, horizontality and

equality, it seemed, were able to claim a certain authority to make their voice heard and appearance known above others:

“The difference is that you have a certain confidence when you’re like ‘middle class’ or something. You’ve got educated... because there’s a cocky-ness that comes with that, isn’t there? Like a *confidence* within your classes: ‘oh look, I know how to speak good, you can’t fool my lawyer, I’ve read a few books...’” (2012:7)

“Again, it’s arse over tit, because the people who had the money to make the phone calls probably organised it [Occupy LSX]! Who already had upbringings which allowed them to have the *confidence* to make those phone calls to places, probably has contacts from when they were at *uni* and stuff like this. So it’s completely the other way round...” (2014:5)

“It’s easy for articulate, educationally-privileged, middle class people like me, who actually *enjoy* talking in groups of people.” (2014:9)

The repetition of ‘confidence’ as a performative construct of social capital and socio-economic class seemed to be something that allowed people from certain educational backgrounds to take advantage of the (fetishized) ‘structureless’ space. Indeed, the access to such social resources were clearly beneficial in the GA, and therefore distributed the power of voice and appearance unequally within the movement.

There was also an evident inequality of voice and appearance within the movement in terms of gender, with men being cited as most likely to speak from a presupposed position of ‘legitimate authority’, as well as tending to assume roles as spokespersons, organisers of working groups, facilitators or final decision-makers:

“Yeah, I mean, well the notorious thing about our working group is that (a) we’re mostly blokes, and mostly older blokes... why that is, I’m not sure. Because there’s a lot more... much better gender balance in virtually all the other groups at Occupy, and there’s a lot more being really driven by both genders. I really don’t think we can use any excuses...” (2013:2)

“Undoubtedly there was a gender imbalance in the camp; I’m not sure about the movement. But in the camp (I was one of the people who stayed in the camp) by the end, there were 5 women there!” (2014:10)

*So, were you able to bring your experiences of Greenham Common to St Paul’s?*

“I tried to! It was quite hard work! To the extent... I mean, I think it’s interesting when one looks at feminism in that context, because I think there is still a tendency for a certain amount of dismissal of women – particularly *younger women*. It’s quite complicated in meetings to get your voice heard... as you commented about the GA: you can sit around waving your hands for ages and the facilitator doesn’t notice you.” (2014:12)

The persistence of patriarchal structures therefore indicated a certain tyranny of structurelessness in that they were not reflected upon in any meaningful sense, and certainly, when they *were* reflected upon, were being reduced to issues of process, pragmatics or individualised identity politics, rather than a critical discussion of the movement’s universal boundaries of exclusion. While these activists reflect upon the movement, for instance, and recognise that there was a problem with an unequal distribution of voice along lines of gender, they nevertheless seem rather perplexed as to why this happened in what was supposed to be a horizontal space *outside* of such structures.

Therefore, as well as this complicity with patriarchal structures of privilege which created a tendency to dismiss women or have them ‘ignored’ by the facilitator, it was also pointed out that male activists seemed to be more likely to take over discussions. For some activists, men within the movement were also more likely to be susceptible to particularly dogmatic or unrelenting political agendas which they saw not so much as ‘views to be discussed as part of a negotiation towards a universal ‘we’, but instead as *universal truths* which others in the movement simply needed to learn as soon as possible:

“I think we were certainly conscious of it. *We did sort of try to counter that by effective facilitation.* Reflecting on it a bit more, it does tend to be men that *monopolise the time and speak for a long time...* and there have been occasions where men have been aggressive, even overtly aggressive really (not often, but it only has to happen once to put someone off). *Women don’t hog the space in the same way as blokes do* and they *don’t take it so personally* if the facilitator tries to bring discussion to a close or invite others to contribute.” (2014:1)

“A lot of these white, cis-gendered men you are talking about typically tended to be old Marxists, or perhaps people who only give a shit about one cause, which is the idea that these bankers are to blame for everything that’s going wrong in the world. And with that, as the movement slowly crumbled, you started to see this *concentration of those types of politics* and those types of ‘physicalities’ of people, those *identities*. It’s something that’s been very difficult to penetrate.” (2014:8)

“People would argue and debate... then you would realise that there was one person – *often a man*, but not always – who would just not allow things to move forward. And it would be out of... the most generous thing I can think of is that they would *genuinely think they were smarter than you*. That ‘you would just not understand’, y’know? It was very... it’s going on until this day with the GA model.” (2014:10)

Pre-distributed as possessing sensible voice and appearance, as well as playing into patriarchal structures in which their particular views were understood to be universal truths, meant that this was an inequality which was able to persist within Occupy (in) London. The tendency for men to ‘monopolise time’ or ‘take it personally’ when facilitators moved on are indicative of this problem, but there is also the suggestion here that their more dogmatic stance became further concentrated as the movement went on. With patriarchal privilege, therefore, there came an apparent unwillingness to relent, compromise or negotiate on equal terms with those who were distributed as *not* possessing legitimate or sensible voice and appearance. As such, despite being a critique of wider inequality in society, Occupy (in) London was not a prefiguration of a more equal organisation,

but instead allowed their complicity with wider structures to flourish via the tyranny of structurelessness.

Finally, this problem was also apparent with distributions of race and ethnicity within the movement. Not only was it the case that Occupy (in) London simply did not reflect the ethnic make-up of the city around it, but secondly, the movement did not address the structural racism of capitalism *historically* as part of its critique, leaving the colonialism and exploitation which underpins the City of London's wealth and power largely un-addressed (with only a few exceptions). What's more, it is problematic that these historical structures of European privilege, as well as the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity globally, are all issues which *neoliberalism also seeks to address by appealing to structurelessness*. By suggesting that capitalism will eventually distribute resources equally and fairly if it is left un-structured and un-regulated, for instance, Milton Friedman argued "the great virtue of a free market system is that it does not care what colour people are; it does not care what their religion is; it only cares whether they can produce something you want to buy" (1993:19). Like Occupy, then, by promoting the idea of structurelessness, neoliberalism *also* overlooks those structures which persist, leaving them ultimately un-addressed and un-challenged.

There were a number of activists, however, who *were* willing to be reflexive upon the racial and ethnic make-up of the movement as a problem:

"As time goes on, it tends to be the same people. It's *a lot less diverse now*. For example, it's mainly white (I'm thinking of all the people I see on a regular basis, it's mainly white). It's still mixed up in terms of socio-economic... if you can put people in those kind of categories. It's probably fair to say there is more men..." (2014:1)

“After we’ve come to an agreement [on the initial statement] – there was about 1000 people in St Paul’s when that happened – we realised that we’re *not* of all races. Someone from, say, indigenous people in some country, would see it as too *imperialistic*. Occupy Brighton said: ‘we welcome all people and we are all individuals’ and, in some ways that was a better statement than saying: ‘we are all people’. We should have said: ‘we welcome everyone’.” (2014:2)

“The movement was very *white*. But I think, if there’s any kind of predominance, that’s not to do with the movement but the *still remaining patriarchal structures within society* which give rise to these unfortunately natural<sup>8</sup> remaining structures.” (2014:4)

Again, what we see is that despite the fetishisation of openness and outside-ness, there was a certain homogenisation and exclusion as the movement went on *anyway*, which was not the result of a reflexive negotiation of a collective universal identity, but was instead created by an *unwillingness* to reflect upon these issues due to the fetishisation that their space was outside of such structures. Indeed, the second activist brings us back to the initial statement as the founding assertion of the movement, but then problematically argues both for more individualism *and* openness (‘we welcome everyone’) as an antidote. This is in contrast to the final activist, however, who offers a critique which recognises the problematic predominance of wider social structures and opts *not* to fetishise the movement as somehow outside of those structures.

It has been argued here that, when Occupy (in) London attempted to resist social structures of inequality and power by creating their own space as a prefigurative experiment that avoided such issues, they inadvertently made themselves vulnerable to reproducing those distributions within their own movement. Indeed,

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<sup>8</sup> To clarify, it is my impression that this activist did not mean ‘natural’ in any essentialist sense, but more as a reference to the persistence of these structures and norms.

as has been argued elsewhere, the idea of prefiguration should be considered a 'dead end' for activism, precisely because it "suggests that the encampment constitutes a genuine space for open and democratic debate in the first place... hereby, an obvious fact is ignored: the camp operates within an already existing, highly complex and differentiated civil society" (Roghoff 2013:163). As such, I argue against ideas of prefiguration in which movements are thought to constitute a unique 'public sphere' (Habermas 1987) or 'interstitial space' (Wright 2010) or even an 'agora' (Bauman 2000), because these ideas fetishise such a space outside of dominant power structures and foreclose the possibility of a reflection on the structures that remain.

The problem with inequality within Occupy (in) London was that, despite their attempt to create an inclusive, horizontal and prefigurative space, "words uttered by some seem to count so much more than words uttered by others" (Hewlett 2007:97) and therefore a tyranny of structurelessness – which fetishized both openness and horizontality – *prevented* any radical reflection upon their complicity with the distribution of the sensible. As such, whilst I have argued that an explicitly exclusive identity is necessary, this is one that *must* remain open to contestation and reflection so as to not exclude 'those that should be included'. Homogenisation and exclusion happened *anyway* within Occupy (in) London, but rather than happening on a radically reflexive basis, it instead undermined the organisation, symbolic efficiency and qualitative extension of the movement's politics. Or as one occupier put it to me, while the movement cannot be based on individualised single-issues (because it needs to be extended), what must be central to this collective expansion is a reflection upon points of preclusion and inequality:

“If we’re ever going to achieve in a struggle, it can’t just be a single issue for the people who are fighting it – it’s got to be *expanded somehow* – but central to that is this idea of checking privilege.” (2014:8)

## Conclusion

The issue of foreclosure by wider social structures were not unique to Occupy (in) London and others have recognised similar problems faced by other Occupy groups around the world, where: “the more diverse the members are in terms of ideology, education and cultural background, (1) the harder it is to reach consensus, (2) the more likely it is that pre-existing inequalities of race, class, gender and so on will be reproduced within the group... and (3) the harder the structure is to sustain” (Leach 2013:182). In this chapter, I sought to address these issues by arguing that ‘we are the 99%’ offered a political potential to create a collective ‘we’ and a universal statement on equality (‘the 99%’) that could overcome these problems by: (1) allowing pragmatic organisation (2) sustaining the structure and symbolic consistency of the movement and (3) extending the movement beyond its immediacy. This meant, however, reflecting on Butler’s critique of the universal, who argues that while the universal can be useful it nevertheless risks overlooking preclusions and inequalities between the diverse people that it intends to include. On the other hand, however, I also argued with Dean and Žižek that an exclusive universal identity is still necessary, albeit one which creates the space for negotiation and reflection upon those inevitable exclusions.

I then went on to argue that this political potential of ‘we are the 99%’ was, firstly, not able to be realised in a movement that remained complicit with values of



individualism and libertarianism. In an individualised society, where it is “easy to recognise individual interests as the only ‘real’ ones” because “the social world has been stripped of the institutions on which the possibility of collective affiliations and futures depended” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007:533), the complicity with such values prevented the possibility of collective universalism, problematically rendering the movement disorganised, inconsistent and located in isolated expressions of political intensity (rather than a qualitative extension outside of the movement). Secondly, I then argued that Occupy’s political possibilities were paradoxically foreclosed through a fetishisation of openness and outside-ness. Whilst any democratic movement would need to include a diverse range of people and ideas, it is the *fetishisation* of prefiguration that actually led to a limitation of this possibility. In other words, the tyranny of structurelessness meant that Occupy (in) London *did* eventually become homogenous and exclusive, but not in a manner which allowed the negotiation and contestation of their appearance.

I therefore agree that, while a collective universal identity is necessary as “both a ‘disidentification’ with the existing order and the emergence of a new subject name different from any already identified as part of that order”, this is *not* because activists are able to create a space in which pre-existing identities and distributions no longer apply, but because a “genuine political struggle is... not a struggle for identity by pre-given subjects of classes (that would simply involve a reclassification within the police order) – it is the collective actions through which one *becomes a subject*” (Bassett 2014:2). ‘We are the 99%’ offered the chance for the negotiation of an exclusive collective and universal identity which was truly radical and able to contest the pre-existing distribution of the sensible, but instead Occupy (in) London

remained problematically foreclosed by the social context in which it came about, overlooking implicit preclusions and unable to establish an organised, consistent and extended identity. As I will reiterate in the next section, therefore, insisting that resistance is 'outside' of power is not conducive to a reflection upon structural complicity, and therefore prevents the opportunity to overcome any foreclosures of possibility therein.

## 5. 'This is what democracy looks like'

### Pursuing authenticity

"Icons of resistance, like many of these totems of resistance, they've been sort of monetized and captured by and perverted by the forces that we're seeking to overturn. I mean, I'm a child of the sixties, which was another period of great hope when we thought we would change the world, love, peace... and within less than a decade it was *monetised and bastardised*. Our heroes became tax-exiles and financial whiz-kids rather than artists (I mean not all of them...) but the whole thing was sucked into the money machine and created accordingly."

Occupy London Activist (2013:12)

After letting me through the gate and giving me a brief tour, we had been stood talking for quite a while about the purpose of my research. Yet, when I asked for an interview, she nevertheless refused and insisted that they weren't 'activists' at Rochester Square Gardens; they were 'hippies'. Having only recently appropriated the abandoned garden centre in Camden there seemed to be a lot of work that still needed to be done. The greenhouses were mostly smashed up and overgrown with a lot of rubbish strewn about, but they had nevertheless already managed to grow some food in the short time they had been there (I was there when they discovered the first tomato). It was hard not to admire this squat as something quite beautiful. There were around 10 people permanently living here who were attempting to live 'outside' of society and to be as self-sustainable as possible: growing their own food; recycling their water; and opening up this derelict space for local community events. Even though I had been pointed here by Occupy activists, there was little evidence of political organisation apart from a printing press and a couple of squatters who told me of their previous involvement in the Occupy movement.

They kept a lock on the gate for security, fearing either police eviction or an overload of squatters. Some were maintaining a full-time job outside of the squat and donated some of their wages for food whilst others (who had been there the longest) focused more on developing this space: cooking, gardening, cleaning, fixing bikes, and thinking about insulation for the forthcoming winter.

As suggested in chapter 2, there are a number of useful comparisons that can be made between the Occupy movement and the activism of the 1960s, and here I go further to suggest that we can productively trace the history of contemporary activism – as well as its normative foreclosures – back to a common point in the 1960's counter-cultural movement. In particular, as well as the similarities between Occupy and May '68 that I have already highlighted (in terms of urban space, a concern with hierarchical power and authority, and a libertarian distrust of formal political organisations like the PCF) we can also see a number of *cultural* similarities. Indeed, as one occupier pointed out to me, “there were also people [at Occupy (in London)] branded in different ways... branded in terms of wearing other protest-activist insignia (May 1968, those types of badges)” (2014:8) and this is suggestive of a certain culture and style shared by contemporary activism and 1960s activism, reflecting common grievances that sought to go beyond the perceived stifling nature of conformity and symbolic discipline. As argued in the previous chapter, this therefore demonstrates a problematic libertarian turn away from collectivities, towards a more open and individualised approach to resistance that aims to prevent universality in all guises.

In this chapter I argue that, while the sixties can definitely be seen as an important time where new social movements emerged and highlighted previously marginalised politics which had been historically side-lined or precluded from the 'we' of the left; it can also – un-coincidentally – be seen as the point of emergence for a 'new spirit of capitalism'. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) have argued, this new spirit is something of a cultural change that created norms and justifications for the continuing accumulation and reinvestment of capital. Pointing in particular to an apparent change in corporate management style in the sixties, they see this as evidence for a wider cultural change that sought to offer new individual freedoms as part of a capitalist market which, rather than a straightforwardly oppressive relationship between (industrial) capitalists and workers, instead emphasised:

“...autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphous capacity, multitasking (in contrast to the narrow specialisation of old labour), conviviality, openness to others and novelty, availability, creativity, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences, being attracted to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts... *taken directly from the repertoire of May 1968.*”  
(Boltanski & Chiapello 2007:97 *emphasis added*)

I seek to build upon the problems of foreclosure by individualist and libertarian norms (which we discussed in the previous chapter) by problematizing what I argue to be the *central* value that encapsulates this new spirit of capitalism: the pursuit of *authenticity*. By authenticity, I mean the notion that a critical distance could and should be adopted towards the corrupting and stifling influence of capitalism, with the 'more authentic' deemed to be far from the instrumental rationality of the market and the 'less authentic' deemed to have 'sold out' or been incorporated.

The new spirit of capitalism complicates this idea by making the pursuit of authenticity *part of capitalist accumulation itself* and, in particular, I look at the discussions of boycotting and *buycotting* as a bid to find an authentic space ‘outside’ of dominant capitalist relations, before concluding that it is ultimately problematic to frame resistance as a matter of maintaining purity or authenticity, in that it paradoxically reiterates those relations and norms. I then move on to look at the way in which such concerns mapped onto the organisation of Occupy (in) London, suggesting that the preoccupation with authenticity also created problematic hierarchies and distributions of the sensible *within* the movement through idea of the ‘authentic activist’. To begin with, however, I will first offer a critical discussion of Boltanski and Chiapello’s thesis to preface what I see to be at stake in the new spirit of capitalism and this pursuit of authenticity.

## The new spirit of capitalism

Because Boltanski and Chiapello see capitalism as an inherently *amoral* economic system and social order – with economic accumulation and re-investment not in-themselves possessing any internal consideration of a ‘common good’ – they argue that capitalism is a system that must look outside itself for cultural justification.

They therefore propose that a new spirit of capitalism can be recognised from the sixties onwards, *which involved a certain convergence between capitalism and its critique*. In the process of seeking a distributing frame for the morality and legitimacy of such a system, there was an apparent incorporation of (what they call) the ‘artistic critique’ of capitalism as something disenchanting, inauthentic,

alienating, oppressive, meaningless, standardised, regimented and destructive of aesthetic beauty. As such, they argue that capitalism paradoxically “needs its enemies, people whom it outrages and who are opposed to it, to find the moral supports it lacks and to incorporate mechanisms of justice whose relevance it would otherwise have no reason to acknowledge” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007:27). Those who are enemies of capitalism, who are outraged and oppose it, therefore counter-intuitively offer the moral support for that system insofar as it incorporates those values which (otherwise) it would not be compelled to acknowledge.

What the new spirit of capitalism can be said as sharing with this artistic critique, therefore, is an aim to address the ‘inauthenticity’ of market practices, by offering a liberation of “people’s aspirations to mobility, to multiply their activities, to greater opportunities for being and doing [that] emerge as virtually boundless reservoir of ideas for conceiving new products and services to bring to the market” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007:437). This creates a market-driven culture that seeks to become more ‘authentic’ by accounting for its own critique, creating cultural norms in work and consumption which emphasise the difference, creativity and individual personalisation that mass production and collective (or state) organisation are, in contrast, said to stultify. These new (post-Fordist) aspirations that arose in the sixties, in other words, were specifically libertarian aspirations for a *cultural authenticity*, which was “translated into a question for consumption that individualises its consumer” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007:99) meaning that it was no

longer simply about belonging or ‘fitting-in’; but longing and standing-out<sup>9</sup>. It was no longer about a massifying culture; but an individualising one where each can feel that their individual liberty was not being limited by market or state.

Whilst I find Boltanski and Chiapello’s argument compelling and convincing in thinking through the cultural intertwining of capitalist power and anti-capitalist resistance, I nevertheless argue that they under-emphasise how these post-Fordist aspirations also provided a culture for a specifically *neoliberal* common sense (which came into mainstream popularity around the same time as the ‘new spirit’ and, as I have already argued, had been reasserted in the post-crash moment).

Despite recognising that the new spirit of capitalism was “formulated in a libertarian rhetoric” and that “the critique of the state in the 1970s was apt not to perceive its proximity to liberalism: it was, as it were, liberal without knowing it” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007:202); this is nonetheless shy of Heath and Potter’s assertion, for example, that the counter-culture also “shared many of the individualistic and libertarian ideas that have always made neoliberalism and free-market ideology” (2006:72). This is important to recognise because such a complicity with the market-led anti-statism of neoliberalism becomes particularly problematic after the crisis, suggesting that the apparently counter-cultural heritage of Occupy shared much with the very ideology which led to the financial crisis in the first place and foreclosed political possibility afterwards.

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<sup>9</sup> Albeit in a recognisably sensible fashion, encouraging consumers to “put pleasure before sacrifice, accumulate and display to create an identity beyond the social which is recognised by it” (Hall, Winlow & Ancrum 2008:64).



Furthermore, it could also be argued that Boltanski and Chiapello somewhat contradict themselves when they attempt to separate the 'artistic' critique outlined above and what they call the 'social' critique. Whilst correctly identifying that capitalism accounts for what they call the 'artistic critique' of capitalism and therefore incorporates the pursuit of authenticity into its own mechanisms; their insistence that this leaves a *social* critique unaddressed seems to play back into this idea of a pursuit for authenticity. In other words, by arguing that the social critique of capitalism (by which they mean, specifically, concerns around the egoism of private interests, inequality and poverty) remains unaddressed by this new spirit, they remain within the *prefigurative* idea that there can be found an 'outside' space for a more *authentic politics* (a critique un-incorporated by and at an authentic distance to capitalism). On the contrary, however, the social critique can be shown to be *just* as complicit with the pursuit of authenticity within capitalism (perhaps even more so in that it denies this complicity even more fervently). Indeed, we can find many instances in which the concerns of the social critique – the egoism of private interests and grievances over inequality and poverty – have been directly addressed by consumer capitalism.

The concern over the egoism of private interests, for example, is a critique which can be found in many popular and high-grossing blockbuster films. Whether through an assertion that there is something more 'authentic' or 'real' than a consumer lifestyle (e.g. *Fight Club*; *American Beauty*; *The Truman Show*); or that the 'bad guy' is an evil corporation (e.g. *Avatar*; *Wall-e*; *Erin Brokovich*) or a personification of the bourgeois capitalist (e.g. *Spider-man*; *Titanic*; *The LEGO Movie*); or that competition and 'stopping at nothing' can have adverse effects on

others (e.g. *Jurassic Park*; *Office Space*; *Lord of the Rings*)... warnings about the inauthentic egoism of private interests are a central and profitable theme of Hollywood products. The popular culture listed above, therefore, is indicative of the way in which the social critique is also complicit with capitalist culture, with “commercial fantasies of rebellion, liberation and outright ‘revolution’ against the stultifying demands of mass society are commonplace almost to the point of invisibility in advertising, movies and television programming” (Frank 1997:4).

As for the second social critique of inequality and poverty, this can also be seen as taken into account by the new spirit of capitalism through so-called ‘radical consumption’ (Littler 2009) where consumers are able to perform politically through market-sanctioned lifestyle choices. We now have the opportunity to enact our criticism of inequality and poverty, for example, by not only boycotting (i.e. avoiding) certain products, but also through *buycotting*<sup>10</sup> (i.e. conspicuously obtaining) those products which align with our grievances. Whether the products are green, organic, fair-trade, or provided by more ethical companies who don’t dodge tax, cause environmental harm, or work with controversial governments; such moral questions of capitalism become *part of the competitive authenticity* of socially critical products and brands. In other words, the irony is that “the specific constellation of anxieties about consumption has combined with the ever-expanding niche markets of neoliberal consumer capitalism” (Littler 2007:1) which *includes* the social critique that Boltanski and Chiapello try to rescue as an unincorporated and authentic basis for resistance.

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<sup>10</sup> I take this term from Albinsson, Wolf & Kopf (2010).

It seems that Boltanski and Chiapello therefore repeat the mistake of fetishizing a space 'outside' of capitalism as necessary (or even possible) for resistance. Even the framing of their argument in terms of 'incorporation' or 'co-optation' suggests that they see the social critique as something as emerging 'outside' before then being corrupted and rendered inauthentic. However, it could just as easily be argued that many products are in fact *precorporated* through "pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes of capitalist culture" (Fisher 2009:9) and sold with their self-critique already built-in, like 'pre-faded blue jeans' (Hall, Winlow & Ancrum 2008:110). In other words, it seems that the (artistic or social) critiques of capitalism can emerge from within the boardroom and marketing department itself, with a kind of ironic consumption thereby supplying niche market demand for critiques of the market. Or as Naomi Klein puts it, "something not far from the surface of the public psyche is delighted to see the icons of corporate power subverted and mocked... there is, in short, a market for it" (2001:287). In contrast to the post-war period, where conformity was an impediment to economic growth (Hall, Winlow & Ancrum 2008:113), the myth of co-optation instead allows for a market in which diversity is facilitated by multiply offers of 'authentic' commodities. Or, in other words, such "manufactured and mass-marketed rebellion must be passed off as 'co-optation' in order that the perpetual cycles of competition and obsolescence in which the subject feels trapped can be blamed on the oppressive 'system' rather than the true source in the underlying code of bourgeois individualism manifested in the competitive consumption of positional goods that signify individuality" (Hall, Winlow & Ancrum 2008:109).

As such, the paradox of constructing resistance as a pursuit of authenticity is that it can become complicit *via its very pursuit of non-complicity*. Simply by holding up authenticity as a value, critiques of capitalism can form cultural norms and logics which actually propel consumer capitalism and the financial system of credit facilitating it. Indeed, it seems that “conformity quickly became the new cardinal sin in our society” (Heath & Potter 2006:31) leading to a situation in which activists “identify consumerism with conformity... [and] as a result they fail to notice that it is rebellion, not conformity, that has for decades been the driving force of the marketplace” (Heath & Potter 2006:102). Or, as Frank argues, in ‘resistance’, “obsolescence [has] found a new and more convincing language” (1997:31) by galvanizing profitable niches into a perpetually creative and innovative force for market growth and the extension of consumer credit. Rather than simply being oppressive, therefore, “consumer capitalism did not demand conformity or homogeneity; rather it thrived on the doctrine of liberation and continual transgression that is still familiar today” (Frank 1997:20).

Rather than fetishizing resistance as something which needs to be ‘authentic’ and ‘pure’ – something which “to earn the label ‘authentic’... must be drawn from outside the commodity sphere, from what might be called ‘sources of authenticity’” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007:443) and which are therefore “endowed with a value that cannot be equated with the commodity and would be destroyed if they were introduced into the commodity circuit” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007:466) – it therefore seems important to instead recognise that the pursuit of authenticity is always-already precorporated by prevailing distributions of power (or, as I argued in chapter 2, that power and resistance are structurally intertwined). It is my

contention, therefore, that the pursuit of authenticity is a cultural driving force for contemporary capitalism, with potential consequences for the foreclosure of political possibility, because when activists “step off the straight and narrow career-and-materialism groove you just end up in another one – the groove for people who step off the main groove” (Klein 2001:63). It is Occupy (in) London’s extension and reiteration of this counter-intuitive distribution of ‘non-conformity as conformity’ to which I now turn.

## **From boycott to buycott**

If “capitalism, at the level of consumption, integrated the legacy of ’68 [and] the critique of alienated consumption” then the result is that “authentic experience matters” (Žižek 2009:54), sustaining market demand for products and experiences “neither on account of their utility, not as status symbols: we buy them to get the experience provided by them, we consume them in order to render our lives pleasurable and meaningful” (Žižek 2009:52). In other words, the new spirit of capitalism is a useful concept for understanding how the desire for more and more commodities that are ‘authentic’ (i.e. anti-market, anti-authority, anti-massification and un-incorporated) has led to a situation in which “the eternal urge for escape has never enjoyed such niche marketing” (Klein 2001:64). Each resistance against inauthenticity not only *adds* to the innovative and creative opportunities for market investment and provision of consumer credit, however, but subsequently also creates a problem for those who want radical social change, in that their very resistance is potentially maintaining the predominant distributions of the sensible.

In this section, I argue that insofar as we can find evidence for a pursuit or preoccupation with authenticity within Occupy (in) London, then we find evidence for a certain foreclosure by the new spirit of capitalism, as the movement unintentionally extended those very norms and distributions which they were intending to change.

During my fieldwork, I found that a number of activists involved with Occupy (in) London did indeed demonstrate a concern for the authenticity of their resistance, becoming particularly apparent when they talked about the movement in terms of being consumeristic, co-opted or dishonest:

“The *consumeristic model* is so much easier... ‘cause you just... you buy your t-shirt and you buy your mask, and *of course* you’re part of it, ‘cause you’ve got the t-shirt! You got the mask! But *you didn’t have to spend any time in the tent or in the mud protesting* to feel like you’re then part of that thing.” (2012:3)

“A lot of *rebellious got co-opted though* didn’t it? I mean, the whole thing of revolution: it’s just the same sixties stuff, you know? It’s the fact of... where are all the people from 1968 who were throwing bottles in France? Where are they? What are they doing? *And where are all the hippies?*” (2012:7)

“There is a danger in the activist scene of the commodification of some of these ideas – anarchism or something like that – it can be easy to *package up these ideas and sell them to people*, rather than explore them in a more *honest way*.” (2014:4)

The ‘consumeristic model’ is seen here as something that corrupts resistance, interpassively preventing people from doing the ‘authentic’ thing of being in a tent in the mud and instead allowing them to feel part of the movement whilst remaining ‘inauthentic’. Such rebellious commodities as t-shirts and masks are subsequently seen as being co-opted from a more ‘authentic’ and ‘pure’ time of the sixties (leading to the second activist to sarcastically ask ‘where all the hippies are’,

suggesting that he ‘knows full well they’ve been incorporated’); whereas ‘authentic radical ideas’ are seen to be always in danger of being co-opted, made too ‘easy’ and ‘dishonest’, through their incorporation into the cultural industries.

This concern, however, was not always so straightforwardly expressed, and for one activist in particular, there was a certain complexity to his understanding of the problem of authenticity:

“You do kind of... we do I suppose in some ways purchase goods that help us feel part of something, that connectivity with other people... so I guess it’s part of it. It’s just I don’t think it should be that important. Yeah, I don’t think it should that valued ‘cause you know... when I go to these meetings, it’s like: ‘well, should I wear my more baggy jeans? Or my ripped clothes to feel that slight kind of original activist look?’ It’s like no, it’s like no, bollocks. I’m just going to be myself.” (2012:15)

Beginning with a dismissal of the idea that activists buying into movements might be problematic and suggesting that he saw Occupy as more authentic than such trivial concerns, this occupier then goes on to illustrate this by sharing his thought process about achieving an ‘original activist look’, deciding that *this* was also *inauthentic* and that he should just be his (authentic) self. Whilst this is a particularly sophisticated point of view, what nevertheless continues to overarch the whole thought process is a continued concern with the pursuit of authenticity. As he concludes, ‘buying into’ the movement or ‘attempting to fit in’ would be *inauthentic*; whereas just being ‘himself’ (which he seems to suggest would clash with the type of people already in the movement) would be the *authentic* option.

This particular activist (who found himself somewhat on the fringes of Occupy (in London and was finding it difficult to get involved in the movement) was not alone

in having a multifaceted logic in dealing with the apparent contradictions of consumer capitalist culture. Others who pointed to the ways in which this system corrupted their authentic resistance *also* recognised how difficult it was to be 'outside' the system, but nevertheless maintained that this authentic distance was nevertheless *desirable*:

"Well, if you want to look at the ways in how capitalism can swallow up its own contradictions, it does it very effectively, y'know?" (2012:2)

"Because you are in the current system, you're so *engulfed* in it, it's very hard to find a way to resist it or to... y'know... 'cause in a way, it's not really enough to resist, you have to start tearing its logic apart." (2012:11)

"Capitalism is so pervasive that I think it's exhausting to try and do it 'right' all the time. Sometimes you just have to say: 'we're all contradictory'. We're contradicting sitting here, right now, this minute, having a conversation about it!" (2014:12)

Whilst these activists demonstrate a particularly reflexive critique of their complicity with wider structures and distributions of the sensible, they nevertheless adopt a framework which structures this relationship in terms of a lost authentic outside which would have allowed effective resistance to happen. Capitalism is full of points of contradiction and complexity, but because it can swallow these up very effectively – and therefore space cannot be found outside – these activists suggest that it's therefore 'very hard' to find a way to resist.

As such, we once again return to the idea that movements need to find a space 'outside' of capitalism, one which is authentic and pure and untainted by such contradictions, in order to facilitate the withdrawal presupposed as necessary for a proper resistance:



"I want to make it perfectly clear, *I am not an anti-capitalist at all*. I buy cigarettes, I buy tobacco, I buy clothes... we live in a capitalist world! I think it's personally *impossible to be anti-capitalist in a capitalist system*. You can avoid the system as much as you like, but I mean... even nowadays... if you are making your own clothes you are buying the fabric off someone; you're buying the sowing machine off someone... there's *no possible way you cannot be capitalist* in this world I don't think." (2012:4)

"I'm really against this marketplace which I've tacitly agreed to part of. Every time I purchase in that marketplace, I am *tacitly saying this is a good thing to do*. So more and more I try to buy second-hand stuff, build my own kit. I'm in the process of building a bicycle generator, second hand solar panels, second hand batteries... that's still benefitting from the market that's there; *but at least it's withdrawing*." (2013:4)

For these activists, it is therefore problematic for their resistance that they are complicit with capitalism and for the first, this complicity actually seems to *foreclose* her approach to resistance, denying even the possibility that she could ever *be* anti-capitalist whilst remaining complicit to a consumer-capitalist system (subsequently allowing capitalism to distribute the 'possible' (sensible) and 'impossible' (non-sensible) limits of her political imagination). For the second, his resentment towards such complicity also leads him towards attempting withdrawal. Whilst recognising that he was still 'benefitting from the market', therefore, he nevertheless maintained that at least second-hand stuff and self-sustaining technology was going in the right direction of finding an authentic space outside of capitalism.

A number of occupiers therefore sought total or partial withdrawal from the market as part of an effort towards finding a space outside (or at least at a distance) from capitalism which would add to the authenticity of their resistance. In particular, through *boycotting* certain commodities where possible, it was thought that a purer

political stance might be achieved. For the same activist who was building the bicycle generator, second-hand solar panels and batteries above, for instance, boycotting was part of this ‘attempted withdrawal’:

“That’s the kind of world we live in. It’s a world of contradictions. And if there was a fair-trade type phone, I’m going to migrate to that. You know, I love my *Converse All-Stars*... but the same thing applies. I would *love to live an un-conflicted life* where every item of clothing I wore was not made at the expense of someone’s health or poverty...” (2013:4)

“For instance, *Black Spot* [ethical trainers produced by *Adbusters*]. If I was to be able to entirely dress in ‘right-on’ stuff, I could stop at any point because I’m not living a conflicted life. I can wear hemp, my trainers were made by people who were given good wages etc... But if I use that as a way of saying: ‘well, I feel good about myself, so I don’t need to worry about anything anymore’... I’m must more interested in somebody that’s alive and active and seeking... and wearing *Converse*... than I am about a self-satisfied smug git who’s wearing an anarchist t-shirt, an Anonymous mask and ‘right-on’ sandals.” (2013:4)

This activist demonstrates an especially reflexive position on complicity. By framing his resistance in terms of ‘boycotting’ (i.e. avoiding) certain commodities, his pursuit is still towards authenticity; but this is an authenticity which *also* rejects the *buycotting* (i.e. obtaining) ‘right-on’ ethical products. In other words, this activist considered authentic resistance – being ‘alive and active and seeking’ – to be those who *don’t* ‘buy into’ such radical products (in contrast to ‘self-satisfied smug gits’ who use them interpassively to ‘feel good’ about themselves). And yet, somewhat contradicting himself, there is also an admission that he would *buycott* towards an ‘un-conflicted life’ where possible (for instance, buying a fair-trade phone if one was available on the market).

These tensions and contradictions and anxieties were widespread within Occupy (in) London and, in particular, it seemed to be the corporate coffee chain *Starbucks*

that became the focus of such tensions around the ethics of boycotting or buycotting commodities. The company had, of course, started as a 'buycott' in the first place, positioning itself as an 'ethical' alternative to other coffee suppliers by making its products 'fair-trade' and focusing on the sustainable coffee production through rainforest alliance schemes. Yet their in-store employment practices and corporate tax avoidance, as well as their sheer ubiquity as a worldwide corporation, has also attracted scrutiny as a target of classic alter-globalisation criticisms (similar to those of *McDonalds*, *Microsoft* and *Nike* in the late nineties, who were criticised for their sway over independent businesses in the market, their exploitation of labour, as well as seemingly creating an homogenous Americanised global culture).

However, the very proximity of a *Starbucks* cafe to pretty much every space in central London also meant that they were the nearest (and, sometimes, *only*) local provider of hot drinks, free Wi-Fi and toilets (and this was especially the case at the St Paul's and Finsbury Square campsites which found themselves in the heart of the city where independent cafes struggle to compete). As such, this meant that many occupiers chose to go to *Starbucks* despite their political concerns with this corrupting the purity of their protest, making the coffee chain a central case study in debates over authenticity:

"Well obviously it's kind of *hypocritical to our whole message* if we're buying from *Starbucks* or stuff like that. It's *not the perfect look* if we have people from Occupy sitting outside *Starbucks* drinking frappuccinos. But *it's all down to choice*, and at the end of... it's kind of difficult in this day and age not to consume those things. Like it's pretty hard to survive when we're not getting donations unless someone pops in *Tesco* and gets some reduced food... it's *better to boycott*; but there's not much you can do sometimes." (2012:5)

“Well I was just walking past *Starbucks* and one of my gripes with the whole thing was how often we’re in *Starbucks* and pubs and things to use the internet... and now I’m using the stuff in the *Barbican* a lot (which I think is ‘better’ just about – using the *Barbican* – even though it’s City of London). Again, me going in the *Barbican* and being followed around and questioned about what I’m doing is... y’know, I’m not going to call it ‘Occupy’. This is the thing. I consider this stuff [the tents] to be ‘occupation’.” (2012:7)

“I’d rather see my mates drinking *Starbucks* and fucking with the heads of the system. Coffee is as important as coffee, that’s it. And it’s just a cheap shot, it’s just a cheap shot... y’know, not to talk to a member of the public or scorn them because they’re drinking *Starbucks*. No, there’s more to *their choice* of being than their choice of coffee.” (2012:9)

The concern here, then, is that through consuming *Starbucks* they are contradicting their politics or rendering the movement’s resistance inauthentic. Whilst recognising that it is difficult to avoid such complicity, the argument is still that it’s ‘better to boycott’ or that some contradictions are better than others (e.g. using Wi-Fi at the City of London sponsored *Barbican* above *Starbucks*). It is also interesting how much individual *choice* is repeated and emphasised here, echoing the libertarian individualism of the previous chapter, and apologising for the perceived ‘inauthenticity’ of such consumerism (seeing is as a ‘cheap shot’ to criticise people for their individual choice).

The coffee controversy also fed into an over-riding concern with how the movement was being aesthetically distributed in terms of appearance and image (that it wasn’t achieving the ‘perfect’ (authentic) look’ for activists to be sat outside *Starbucks*). This became particularly intensified, however, when Conservative MP Louise Mensch commented upon this apparent hypocrisy on a popular satirical news programme. For her, it was a blatant contradiction to their politics for Occupy protestors to be consuming at the coffee chain, arguing that this demonstrated

their inauthenticity as a movement, because “if they prop up a corporate titan like *Starbucks*, they’ve got to ask themselves how much of capitalism they really don’t like” (YouTube 2011). Whilst the logic of her argument was excellently refuted by the other panellists on the show – including Ian Hislop who suggested that “you don’t have to want to return to a barter system in the stone age to complain about the way the financial crisis affected huge numbers of people in the world, do you? Even if you’re having a cup of coffee and you’ve got a tent!” – Mensch’s comments nevertheless hit a nerve in the movement, reflecting already-existing concerns about whether boycotting such corporations was necessary for authentic resistance.

Some activists referred directly to Mensch’s comments:

“There’s a slight contradiction [with drinking at *Starbucks*] and people who do it recognise it’s a contradiction. But it’s so minor, it’s not even worth giving much time to, there are so many more important things. And if you’re out there camping and you’re cold and there is a *Starbucks* literally right next to your tent, I don’t think it’s worth [Mensch] having a go at people for that.” (2014:1)

“Yeah quite a lot of people criticised... there was that person on *Have I Got News For You* who came out complaining that Occupy were drinking coffee in *Starbucks*. If you’ve got a choice of two different coffee shops, it would make sense to boycott and buycott, but in central London where we didn’t have much choice... in terms of *pragmatics*, I’m not sure how much weight that has.” (2014:7)

While emphasising the practicality of finding warm drinks in the middle of London leading them to *Starbucks*, there is still a residual guilt that this is potentially contradicting their activism within such a pragmatic defence of using the chain, suggesting that they still think it is problematic by rendering their activism somewhat inauthentic.

As well as *Starbucks*, another focal point for debates around authenticity through boycotting and buycotting was the (infamous) Guy Fawkes' masks taken from the graphic novel and Warner Brother's film *V for Vendetta*. First used by the Anonymous movement in a protest against Scientology in the USA, the mask has become a popular image for resistance all over the world, yet is nevertheless a copyrighted, plastic commodity, which is mass-produced in sweatshops by multinational toy companies (Sheets 2013). As such, while some activists saw the mask as a symbol of *belonging* – such as one occupier who told me: "I thought I found my people because of the Guy Fawkes masks..." (2014:6) – others explained that they felt conflicted and concerned with the mask's authenticity for their activism:

"I think popular culture *can* be useful, but after a while things become a cliché don't they? So I think *wearing the [Vendetta] mask is almost a cliché now!* But if that's what people want to do; I don't have any problem with it." (2013:6)

"I will *never* buy a t-shirt with Che Guevara on because *if it becomes a fashion it loses its real meaning*. There was a great picture of this factory producing all these Anonymous masks in a massive factory, and to me, it's like *we should give an example of the sort of society we're trying to create*, and you're basically supporting this consumerist culture while you're trying to oppose capitalism and the exclusion it creates. So to me, it's completely wrong. I mean it shouldn't be done. It's good for the media, but then just maybe I think it's because of the visuals (the visuals are very good)." (2013:10)

"You've got the mask, people covering their faces, this whole Anonymous thing along with the tents, the banners... the iconography and the visual symbols and logos *gave the movement identity* and these are important. I mean the [Vendetta] mask... people don't wear it to the [General] Assembly anymore... that has *become a cliché*. People in the movement are upset with a lot of people who have used that image. I mean, who was the famous house DJ from *Radio One* who did a DJ set inside parliament and he wore that mask – 'I'm occupying parliament!' – and most people are never going near that mask again! It's like when you see hipsters turning up to fancy dress parties and hijacked in the same way as Che Guevara's face did." (2014:9)

The common concern here is that the mask had become ‘too popular’ and therefore a ‘cliché’ rendered inauthentic by its over-use and lack of distinction from mainstream consumer culture. As such, it was seen as something which began as potentially useful for identity and the aesthetic ‘visuals’, but had become ‘co-opted’ by consumer culture and turned into a fashion that contradicted the movement’s prefiguration of ‘the sort of society we’re trying to create’. The references to mass consumption – that the mask was mass-produced in sweatshops or used by mainstream cultural icons like *Radio One* house DJs – was therefore seen as damaging the mask’s resistive potential and kudos in a similar way to ‘Che Guevara’s face’.

In particular, the reference to ‘hip’ and ‘hipsters’ is interesting, because whilst most anti-capitalist protestors would reject the middle class pretensions of ‘hipsterdom’, they actually seem to share a common pursuit of the ‘authentic’. Indeed, if we define ‘hip’ as being “concerned more with ‘advanced knowledge about the illegitimate’ and staying one step ahead of the consuming crowd than with any ‘ideology of good community faith’” (Frank 1997:30), then it could be argued that the concern expressed with *Starbucks* and the Guy Fawkes mask becoming cliché echoes the insatiable drive for authenticity by those considered to be ‘hipsters’.

As well as boycotting, however, the Guy Fawkes masks also played into a market logic of *buycotting*, when Anonymous decide to produce a competing mask for activists to buy which was therefore considered to be outside of the problems of complicity:

“Well... Anonymous brought out their *own mask*. It was only a little adaptation, but it has little rosy cheeks, so it wasn’t *V for Vendetta* masks. So the people can’t make money off it. It was more a case of: if you buy the mask, that’s how much it costs to make. Down at St Paul’s they were selling them a pound each. Just ‘cause that’s how much it costs to make them. So no-one was making any profit.” (2012:1)

By producing and selling their own ‘authentic’ and ‘ethical’ mask, Anonymous attempted to circumnavigate contradiction altogether. Yet by doing so, they surely nevertheless played into the neoliberal capitalist logic of competition that, if you don’t like something or don’t find the choice and freedom already within the market, then you should enterprise, innovate and release a competing product. As such, the very concern with being authentic seems to remain something shared by the market and the Anonymous masks boycott alike.

The activists I have quoted in this section, therefore, demonstrate varied and relatively complex reflections on their complicity with consumer capitalism, which I have argued suggests that the pursuit of authenticity was a preoccupation and anxiety within the movement that created conflict within their self-understanding of power and resistance. Regardless of their complexity, however, what all these activists shared was the idea that the pursuit of authenticity was necessary or desirable for authentic resistance and change. Problematically, therefore, they inadvertently *extended* the distribution of consumer capitalism despite their attempt to precisely avoid it, in that the enterprising boycotting and boycotting of individualised consumer choice was seen as the limit of political action.

In addition to this self-reflexive debate over authenticity, however, the same activist who told me about the alternative masks also went on to claim a certain



authority and privileged knowledge on the issue of authenticity, by referring to an occasion when he met the original author of the graphic novel:

“Well, the *V for Vendetta* masks... I used to know a few of the Anonymous here, like proper hard-core Anonymous that used to live in here. But they don’t even wear the *V for Vendetta* masks. The true symbol for Anonymous is a man in a suit with a question mark for a face. That’s what the *true* thing is. But because it’s been adopted and it went viral, that way it got adapted into it. And I’ve spoken to the guy who made *V for Vendetta* the book, he was on a protest march with Anonymous, and he says he does not feel the mask should be used like that. But at the same time, it’s not the mask itself, it’s the symbol it represents. And it’s more symbolism more than the mask itself.” (2012:1)

As such, it seems that this account of the mask suggests something else which is problematic about the pursuit of authenticity, in that not only does it indicate a certain complicity with the cultural logic of the new spirit of capitalism, but (as I will argue in the next section) it also seems to provide activists with a certain self-professed hierarchical *authority*. The idea, for example, that some activists were more ‘hard-core’ or ‘proper’ than others, or were wearing the more ‘authentic’ mask and had a privileged proximity to ‘true’ meanings of such culture, seemed to play once more into the inadvertent power structures that *precluded* others and produced unequal distributions within the movement. In other words, that some saw their activist identity (or the activist identity of others) as ‘more’ or ‘less’ authentic can be shown to play into the structural distribution of the space in which some voices and appearances ‘counted more’ than others.

## Authenticity and hierarchy

In this section, I will demonstrate how the pursuit of authenticity is not only problematic insofar as it demonstrates a complicity with the new spirit of capitalism; but also how this approach and distribution of resistance by the Occupy movement in London created further structures of power and inequality within the movement through the figure of the ‘authentic activist’. The relative dominance of this identity-type, I suggest, further foreclosed the universal potential of the 99% (see chapter 4) because it created preclusions along the lines of the ‘more authentic’ members of the movement (against those designated ‘less authentic’). In other words, the existence of this particular identity type once again pre-defined the movement’s appearance through identity boundaries and distributions (rather than creating the space for the discussion over those boundaries) along the lines of an ‘activist identity’ and subsequently foreclosed Occupy’s collective-universal potential.

While concerns with boycotting and buycotting were therefore prominent, it is *also* problematic that some activists saw themselves as ‘above’ the very questions of authenticity altogether, seeing their own resistance as more authentic because, unlike the others, they did not concern themselves with such trivial problems. In other words, they saw themselves as more authentic than concerns over authenticity:

“People have this – even if they don’t realise they have it – a lot of them have this *stupid idea about purity*. We’re never going to get anything that is completely black or completely white. We’re never going to have anything that’s completely good or completely evil. That’s not going to... in the real world, that just does not happen, y’know?” (2012:14)

“I think a trail of thought that emerged – *the idea of ‘purity’* – this emerged within activist movements and activist mentality as well, and it kind of goes along the terms: ‘unless you’re living out of... unless you’re a freegan living out of dumpsters, unless you’re squatting or not paying rent, unless you’re not buying things from a commercial store or something... *then you’re not pure or something that’s problematic*’. This is a real extreme idea of things and I think its foundation is the idea that an individual can change society by changing their behaviour and things like that. *I don’t really buy into that*. I think this stuff is hypocritical because we’re so like *entrenched and locked* into a market system that you can’t just make a clear break from, whilst trying to actively critique it or participate in an alternative of it... I think it’s quite true that there’s no real alternative to what Mark Fisher calls ‘capitalist realism’ as a dominant imaginary. And I think it’s a dominant imaginary because *the market is reality*. You can’t just step outside that market. I don’t think... I think it’s a really unfair idea.” (2014:4)

“You know, initially, *when my politics were more liberal and unseasoned*. I really would have bought into this idea of cultural capitalism. I would have boycotted things, particularly the Israel-Palestine thing at the time (boycott *Marks and Spencer’s*). At the time, I would have given into that.” (2014:8)

To be clear, whilst I agree with the direction of these criticisms in that they echo the argument made in the previous section (that the idea of ‘purity’ or being ‘outside’ of capitalism is problematic and is not a good presupposition to be building resistance upon because boycotting is not an effective form of politics); there is also a problematic tendency in these quotes to position themselves as authorities having become aware to the ‘truth’ behind the pursuit of authenticity and how the pursuit of purity is not only hypocritical, but ‘stupid’ or ‘unseasoned’. In other words, whilst making an important critique, they nevertheless did this by positioning themselves above those who were unable to recognise such problems.

This self-attributed authority on recognising contradictions above their counterparts not only appealed to an (Althusserian-style) expertise, but also, as demonstrated by others, was expressed using the idea of being a more ‘original’

activist. In these cases, some occupiers considered their resistance to be more authentic than others simply because it pre-dated the current movement, giving them a stronger and more competitive CV, and therefore more ownership and authority – a more legitimate voice and appearance – within the movement when compared to ‘newcomers’:

“I’m not here personally for Occupy, but I’m here with Reclaim the Fields, Reclaim the Streets. But this is where I am as a home. Occupy is home for me.” (2012:1)

“We’re sort of family, we are a community, I mean we started as a community in St Paul’s churchyard and we... somebody referred to us this week actually as *die hards* and I think that’s about right. *Those of us who are still active*, as much as they can be, are *die hards*... they’ve decided to stay because... a few people I know say *it’s a way of life for them*.” (2013:5)

“I think it’s true that a number of people who were active in the sixties – such as myself – will have *a different view* of what is happening because *we’ve seen a lot more*. And we’ve also seen... we were opposed to what was happening in the sixties which was *much more progressive than what’s happening today*. Now we never expected it to go back; but what we have from ’45 to ’75 was probably an aberration.” (2014:11)

Belonging to a previous movement or era, which already had some sort of activist folklore and status around it (such as Reclaim the Streets in the late 1990’s or ‘the sixties’ in general) provided a certain claim to authority for some activists, who felt they ‘knew better’ than newer (and often younger) activists. Those ‘die hards’, who had already earned their reputation and social capital as being committed and long-term career activists, subsequently seemed to be distributed as possessing a more sensible voice and appearance within the movement, able to make their opinions and views carry more weight within the ‘structureless’ space.

As well as these ‘long-term’ activists that pre-dated the movement, this ‘authority-via-originality’ also played out within Occupy (in) London itself. In an apparent echo of Freeman’s (2013) tyranny of structurelessness, for example, one activist described to me something he called the ‘tyranny of the founders’ as “a sort of inner circle that were ‘experts’ in activism teaching us ‘how it’s done’... I suppose if I was an expert of activism in London – and I’d been around and I’d earned my spurs and my ‘credit rating’ was high – then I could probably meet these people and they could vet me... but one phrase that appeared at the end was the ‘circle of trust’ and it became an identity thing: ‘them and us’” (Burgum 2015). In other words, those who claimed to have founded and organised the movement, who had ‘been there since the beginning’, laid a certain claim to Occupy London as more ‘theirs’ than the newcomers, not only conflicting their attempt to prefigure a truly horizontal space, but also creating a preclusions that foreclosed possibilities for a negotiation over the boundaries of appearance (see chapter 4). Furthermore, those who had attended Occupy LSX at St Paul’s, seemed to use this as a go-to reference for their claim towards representing an authentic universal of ‘Occupy London’ (especially those who claimed they were there on the first day when they drafted the ‘initial statement’).

In addition to these individualised identity-claims to be the ‘original occupiers’, such an authoritative authenticity was also attributed to those who were willing to put their bodies on the line and risk their physical safety or well-being (whether through camping or through altercations with the police):

*“Direct action... physical work... direct action is needed. I’m not denying the amazingness of the internet; but we need more than just signing petitions*

and talking about it. You have to talk before you do action, but you know... to me you feel *alive* when you do direct action, you feel alive, like *you're doing something*<sup>11</sup>, like you've made some change... you're not just sat there passively consuming the television that there's another ten thousand people flooded over there... these people have been murdered for human rights over there... and our government has set up a secret prison complex that's moving more rights and exporting torture out to other countries (and anyone could disappear at any time if the government doesn't like you...)” (2013:9)

“I think there is an *activist identity* and, again, it happened at Greenham [women's peace camp] and needed squashing. It becomes an *accidental hierarchy of the people who have deemed to have done most*. The difficulty of Greenham was, *those of us who had been to prison were given a lot more respect than people who hadn't*, and I think the same thing applies – or did apply at one point – in Occupy. There was a notion that you kind of, if you'd been arrested you'd kind of *got your colours*. And if you camped in the camp, compared with visiting, then you were *more of an activist*. And if you spend a lot of time online rather than physically attending meetings, then you're *less of an activist*.” (2014:12)

Those who were willing (or had a reputation as willing) to risk their physical well-being for the cause created a large amount of respect and status through doing so. As the latter activist puts it, there appeared to be a certain 'ranking' or 'accidental hierarchy' which positioned people as 'more or less of an activist' in line with how much time they spent in the camp, in police custody, or on the receiving end of police violence.

After the violent eviction of St Paul's and the decision of Occupy LSX not to re-occupy, this accidental hierarchy then became spatialized as both groups attempted to claim authenticity for their resistance over the other. While Occupy LSX (now problematically identifying themselves under the universal signifier

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<sup>11</sup> This is also reminiscent of a point I made in the introductory chapter, where Žižek warns us of the tendency for people to just *act* and do *something*, rather than assert the need for reflective inactivity.

'Occupy London') claimed authenticity and authority precisely by cutting off the camps; Finsbury Square and the other sites (now without the financial resource donated at St Paul's and finding it difficult to maintain the camp) saw themselves as more authentic for precisely surviving such hardship. Indeed, the difficulty of sustaining the camp in the face of adversity only added to their self-professed sense of authenticity.

This inequality facilitated by such claims to authenticity therefore caused palpable tensions, resentment, division and fracturing within the movement:

"If you put yourself up as, all of this: 'we're not leaders, we're not this and the other...' It's like, what are you talking about? If you've set yourself up to be getting a microphone out and telling the general public: 'we're marching for this, that and the other... save the NHS' you're putting yourself up as a role model. And you've got to live and die by that. They're worse than the actual bankers because they're going round telling everyone they're better than the bankers!" (2012:7)

"Like, one of the things that pissed me off at St Paul's was just how short-sighted so many people were. Like, I could see some article by some guy being like... saying: 'those of us who learnt out politics in 1999' like 'Seattle Protests' or whatever. And you think like, it's not like 1999 was significantly different from the sixties! Like we have the internet... but like, the world is still recognisable. Even life today, the world is still recognisable what it was... y'know... sixty years ago." (2012:14)

"You know, because we've basically... there's 40 Occupys around the UK, they have their conferences... and I'm just getting really fed up of how people have become really like: 'we're Occupy London'... and some people are like: '*they're not!*' I bring all these contacts from different organisations, and I'm like: 'we need to work together' and they're like: 'oh, *they might try and co-opt the movement*' and that's not what it's about!" (2012:16)

"The people who were staying at Occupy... they were the hardware, they were the computer. And this is the issue. Who decided the GA would be in charge? Who were those specific people that you can then say: 'there's no hierarchy' yet *somebody* put into everybody's minds that was the right way of doing things! It was very hard to change it." (2014:5)

Once again, we see in these accounts appeals by some activists to previous events and activist experience, allowing them to claim authenticity and authority over the movement (such as the short sighted appeal of ‘those of us who learnt our politics in 1999’ or ‘the sixties’). We also see the myth of co-optation return, with divisions between activists meaning a return of that libertarian distrust of other organisations, other groupings and even the GA itself.

In this section, therefore, I have attempted to demonstrate how the Occupy movement in London inadvertently created further unchecked distributions of power within their allegedly horizontal and structureless space. This meant that, when the movement did coalesce and become more exclusive, it did not do so under conditions of acknowledged and reflexive contestation over those exclusions (see previous chapter), but upon precluded groups and identities deemed ‘inauthentic’ and becoming marginalised. Or as one activist put it:

“We’re basically rationalistic, dualistic and reactive. We’re all inheritors of this, kind of, *distorted culture*. And I think... ‘we’re not hierarchical, so we’re horizontal’... *as if just being anti-hierarchy and trying to enforce horizontality just gives us solutions automatically*. And as if organising things in participatory groups (as opposed to engaging with the centralised political system)... I think that’s our biggest problem. The system is very happy that movements *appear radical* – like Occupy – don’t have any means or political levers. I think that fits capitalism quite well!” (2014:3)

Those who were able to claim expertise, knowledge, originality and authority – or demonstrate their privileged fidelity to the cause through physical risk – were seen to be more authentic activists than others *despite* any claims to horizontality. The pursuit of authenticity, in other words, created a situation in which some were able



to claim authority over others, once again demonstrating a tyranny of structurelessness (Freeman 2013).

## Conclusion

Perhaps the best encapsulation of the way in which the pursuit of authenticity creates problems of foreclosure by the distribution of the sensible, is offered by Boltanski and Chiapello when they argue that “even in the case of the most radical movements, it shares ‘something’ with what it seeks to criticise... [which] stems from the simple fact that the normative reference on which it is based are themselves in part inscribed in the world” (2007:40). As I have argued throughout this chapter, this can be shown via a certain preoccupation with ideas of authenticity, rendering the concern to be un-incorporated or *at a distance* from capitalism as part of the new spirit itself. It is therefore problematic that resistance has become a market *tool* in this context, diversifying investment opportunities, market choice and the extension of consumer credit, because this raises a number of important questions around the possibility of a resistance which is actually able to challenge such a distribution, in a situation where “it’s the non-conformists, not the conformists, who are driving consumer spending” (Heath & Potter 2006:106). Rather than a homogenising force, contemporary capitalist ideology instead promotes and thrives off heterogeneous, unique, un-disciplined, and perpetually unsatisfied libertarian identities, always in search of the next authentic experience or product. As such, this is a consumer market which is always able to overcome its own stultifying limits and incorporate its own critique, creating a culture where

“not only resistance but even our distaste of artificiality of consumerism itself has for a long time been incorporated into marketing strategies” (Hall, Winlow & Ancrum 2008:100).

However, the pursuit of an authentic resistance – such as through boycotting and buycotting – remained a prominent concern of many of the activists within Occupy (in) London. I therefore argue that, despite the attempt to find authentic distance or a space outside of capitalism, such an idea counter-intuitively indicates a certain foreclosure by the new spirit. The concern with aesthetic symbols of their resistance being ‘too popular’ or ‘cliché’ demonstrated a problematic hipsterdom, but beyond this, I then went one step further to argue that even those who *do* recognise the problems with this complicity acted in a way which created an accidental hierarchy of authentic authority – those who were able to recognise the ‘truth’ of activism through appeals to an activist biography or willingness to put themselves in harm’s way – which not only directly contradicted the movement’s horizontal aims; but created the *preclusions* that Butler warned us about in chapter 4. As the movement divided and coalesced around these identities, it is problematic that it did so *without* the reflexive and critical contestation of those exclusions (necessary for a truly radical universal collectivity) and instead only repeated and extended the wider distribution of the sensible and its preoccupations with pursuing the authentic. This framing of *resistance* as the pursuit of authenticity was therefore not conducive to a radical politics; but we also need to consider the way in which Occupy (in) London framed and distributed the *power* which they were ‘up against’.

## 6. 'Meet the 1%'

### Conspiracy theory and cynicism

"The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence... that is why we must avoid the simple metaphors of de-masking, of throwing away the veils which are supposed to hide the naked reality."

Slavoj Žižek (2008a:25)

The meeting place was the Prince Regent stop on the DLR tube. Whilst we were waiting for something to happen, Police Community Support Officers had begun circulating amongst the crowd, saying hello, being friendly and trying to make casual conversation. As two approached us, however, an activist warned me: 'you know these 'Smurfs' are forward intelligence officers, don't you?' Known as 'Smurfs' for their baby-blue vests, these outwardly friendly PCOs were being immediately treated with suspicion and for having hidden intentions. Suddenly there was a shout for everyone to follow and we moved quickly around the corner to the ExCel centre where the 2013 DSEI arms fair was being held. Green pop-up tents adorned with slogans were quickly set up on the roundabout leading to the entrance whilst others lay down across the entrance gate and chained themselves together. The drums started up. One protestor who had created a fantastic costume of the grim reaper was dancing on stilts just as the 'bike bloc' arrived and everyone cheered as they did a lap of the roundabout. Another activist who I had interviewed earlier in the week walked over to me. Remembering our conversation on undercover police, he pointed out someone who he thought was a plain-clothes officer, commenting on the way he was moving around the protest and the

suspicious manner in which he appeared to be walking between the police line and the protestors. Most of all, however, he told me the biggest give away were the black boots.

Labelling someone a ‘conspiracy theorist’ is usually taken as an insult because it seems to question their capacity for reason, rational thinking or sanity, insinuating that their grievances should not be considered as ‘sensible’ as others. Indeed, it seems the more elaborate the theory, the more distance people will take from it, with some speculations (for instance, that movements have been infiltrated by undercover police) deemed more ‘sensible’ than others (say, theories of pan-historical and international networks of power operating beyond our comprehension). For example, to speak of the ‘Illuminati’ as an underground network responsible for major historical events (from the French Revolution to 9/11) in pursuing a New World Order; or to mention secret societies such as the Freemasons or the Rothschilds (who, taking after a long line of anti-Semitic tradition in conspiracy theories, are thought to be controlling financial systems, the media, and government) is to risk invitation to mocking laughter, raised eyebrows and a designation as ‘non-sense’.

But, as has been repeatedly argued throughout this thesis, power can be shown to operate through precisely such a designation of ‘non-sense’ that appeals to a normative distribution of the sensible. In Rancière’s words, by appealing to the ‘obviousness’ of what should and should not appear or be heard as a legitimate contention, this policed order can ‘move along’ that which does not belong or partition it as ‘nothing to see here’. In this chapter, therefore, it is my intention to

demonstrate how this art of distribution can also be spotted in the widespread cynicism and conspiracy theories within Occupy (in) London, which were central to the way in which the movement understood and framed that which it was fighting against.

We can define ‘conspiracy theory’ as something which attempts to speculate on *known unknowns* – things we ‘know’ we ‘don’t know’ – about power and which presupposes that there are secret and hidden agencies operating behind appearances. In other words, a conspiracy theory is “a narrative that has been constructed in an attempt to explain an event or series of events to be the result of a group of people *working in secret to a nefarious end*” (Birchall 2006:34 *emphasis added*) and, as such, could be said to apply to a wide number of different examples. Below, for instance, I include within the category of conspiracy theory a number of discourses which are not usually considered to be the same thing – from international networks like the Illuminati, to collusion between national governments and corporations (the 1%), and even to undercover police – but the reason for this, is that my concern is with what the category of ‘conspiracy theory’ *means and does as a construction* of power and resistance. As such, this is not an argument which seeks to make a judgement on a theory’s truth or falsity. Whether the theory is that the Queen of England is a lizard (following David Icke) or that there might be undercover officers at an anti-arms rally, the purpose of this chapter is only to critically reflect on the potential foreclosures and complicities of these *cynical narratives and constructions* of power and resistance; *not* on their accuracy.

We begin with a short literature review, starting with the potential political problems of ‘cynicism’ (outlined by Sloterdijk and Žižek) before moving onto the work of both Birchall and Dean who have (carefully) argued that conspiracy theories might be *useful* for resistance by facilitating the ‘us’ and ‘them’ division necessary for collective identity (see chapter 4). Whilst I tentatively agree with this potential, I nevertheless argue that conspiracy theories actually create more *foreclosures* for political possibilities than opportunities for effective resistance.

Looking at the various conspiracy theories utilised by Occupy (in) London in order to configure the ‘powerful’ (and their relation to ‘them’), the chapter then goes on to argue that even the *critics* of conspiracy theories (the cynics’ cynics) are problematic in their disparagement and dismissal of conspiracy theory. Like individualism, libertarianism, prefiguration and the pursuit of authenticity, therefore, my aim is to demonstrate that cynicism and conspiracy theory were yet another characteristic of the Occupy movement in London which divided and foreclosed the radical possibility of both the tactic of occupation and the identity of ‘we are the 99%’.

## **To tell you the truth**

Conspiracy theories could be seen as the direct result of a disenchanted (post-political) climate, indicating a profound sense of pervasive disillusionment, disconnectedness and alienation felt towards governmental institutions and parliamentary representation, as well as feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, a loss of agency or autonomy, and an anxiety or confusion brought about by a lack of

symbolic efficiency and collective meaning. What can be seen as cutting across all conspiracy theories, then, regardless of their complexity or truthfulness, is that they express a disempowerment felt towards seemingly unaccountable and coercive powerful agencies that are 'out there', preventing or causing change, and operating against 'our will'. Or, in other words, conspiracy theory reflects a widespread *cynicism* which, as Sloterdijk has argued, can be understood as a direct effect of European modernity and 'the enlightenment' insofar as attempts to reveal and illuminate the 'truth' (e.g. the truth of conspiratorial power) actually produce a situation in which "a twilight arise, a deep ambivalence" (1987:22).

If modernity is considered to be a search for reason and truth through rational (scientific) thinking, Sloterdijk argues that in practice the opposite effect is produced by rendering all appearance as necessarily suspicious screens to this 'truth'. In other words, because truth is constructed as something 'hidden' and 'concealed' (*aletheia*) then all appearance (whether 'true' or not) is perceived to be a mask or veil of some deeper meaning. As a consequence, Sloterdijk argues that we live in an age of cynical reason where "a new form of realism bursts forth, a form that is driven by the fear of being deceived or overpowered... everything that appears to us could be a deceptive manoeuvre of an overpowering evil enemy" (1987:330). Counter-intuitively, then, modernity does not bring about a promised 'consciousness' or 'illumination' of the truth, but what Sloterdijk calls an 'enlightened false consciousness' or "a modernised, unhappy consciousness on which enlightenment has laboured both successfully and in vain... it has learnt its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, probably was not able to, put them into practice" (1987:5). Put differently, in attempting to move past the 'naivety' and

‘irrationality’ of spiritual or religious truth (seen as the basis for pre-modern sovereign power) modernity instead constructs truth as something ‘out there’ which then needs to be ‘unconcealed’ through the appropriate methods and tools. However, this conceptualisation of ‘truth as hidden’ means that all appearances could potentially be curtains: always hiding something and bringing about distrust and cynicism as an ‘enlightened false consciousness’.

Žižek elaborates upon Sloterdijk’s argument by suggesting that we can see this enlightened false consciousness in the tendency for contemporary subjects to adopt ironic, cynical and distanced positions towards appearances. As he writes, rather than power operating through a false consciousness that hides the truth of power, it is more likely the case that “one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of particular hidden interests hidden behind the ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it” (Žižek 2008a:23). The paradox, in other words, is that the subject who sees themselves as ‘clued-in’ and enlightened to the truth of power behind appearances actually *invests* in that power (and, in comparison, their own disempowerment) through their suspicion of the cover-up in the first place. What’s more, each time the truth is supposed to appear, the ‘secret’ of conspiratorial power is imagined to retreat anew, further invested in by the subject who recognises themselves as enlightened. Subsequently, it is the *non-duped who are in error* because “what they fail to recognise is the symbolic efficiency of illusions [i.e. the curtain itself], the way they regulate activity which generates social reality” (Žižek 2009:78). Power can therefore operate *through* such cynicism, because “with all its ironic detachment, it leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself”



(Žižek 2008a:27) (or, what Rancière might call, ‘the distribution of the sensible’) meaning that “the enemy today”, for Žižek, “is not the fundamentalist but the cynic” (2008e:xxiii).

What Sloterdijk and Žižek are attempting to get at, then, is the way in which cynical appeals for the truth of power to ‘reveal itself’ from behind appearances – as is the case in conspiracy theories – are in actual fact *caught up* in the maintenance and sustenance of that distribution of power. By constructing power as something hidden behind appearance, such theories fail to recognise the structuring role that those appearances have *in themselves* as a distribution of the sensible which “never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth; it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuit” (Foucault 1980:93). Or, as Foucault puts it, “the political question... is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself” (1980:97), with knowledge not being *hidden* by power; but constructed *through* power itself. Yet this is also therefore a power which conspiracy theory is, by definition, unable to reflexively address, because it is based upon the presupposition that power is something hidden which needs to be made ‘transparent’ and (democratically) unconcealed.

Indeed, as Claire Birchall has pointed out, it is problematic to simply equate transparency and revelation with a democratic accountability of power, because “while there are many reasons why transparency is preferable to secrecy... the moral discourse that condemns secrecy and rewards transparency may cause us to overlook the integral, perhaps constitutive role secrecy (in different guises) might play” (Birchall 2011:12). As such, it is also problematic for transparency and secrecy

to be considered as a binary, because the cynical mistrust of appearances can render 'transparency-as-secrecy' (for example, the double-bluff of controlled governmental 'leaks' of information to the press or spin-doctoring). Or, by seeing transparency of power as an end-in-itself, such narratives may inadvertently justify logics behind invasive surveillance ('if you're not guilty, you've got nothing to hide'), as well as providing an unintentional validation of neoliberal parliamentary governance as something which is 'democratic' and accountable at moments of revelation.

In addition, the fetishisation of transparency and revelation as a political aim not only entails complicity with such governmental institutions, but also to the capitalist economy itself. As Dean has argued, in a situation in which political agency and accountability is equated to an increased access to or revealing of information, this actually "damages possibilities for democracy as it becomes materialised in practices of spectacle and suspicion" (Dean 2002:17) and "forecloses politics in the name of communication" (2002:113). In the place of politics, the circulation of 'free information' through the expansion of communicative capitalism is taken as *truth in-itself*, yet this all the while creates profit for corporate entities via its very circulation. Indeed, we could see the rise of the social media industry as precisely built upon aspirations for revelation, encouraging everyone to reveal their 'truths' and (supposedly) leaving governments 'nowhere to hide' from critique.

However, while both Dean and Birchall are therefore *critical* of conspiracy theories as a construction of power and resistance (something which will be further demonstrated by reference to their work throughout the chapter); they both

nevertheless suggest that such theories could *also* offer possibilities for social movements. For Birchall, for instance, conspiracy theories have the potential to refigure that very distribution of ‘what counts’ as sensible knowledge, as well as challenge the limits of what is considered to be rational, reasonable or sensible. In other words, she sees conspiracy theories as offering a ‘folk’ knowledge that oppose the ‘expert’ knowledge held by those in authority, demonstrating “that all knowledge is only ever ‘theory’; that the relationship between a sign and its referent is necessarily inflected by imaginary processes; and that any transcendental truth claims rely on contingent strategies of information” (Birchall 2006:73). Conspiracy theory can therefore challenge claims to authority by testing the limits of the apparent truth of that knowledge and demonstrating the contingency of such truth.

And for Dean, conspiracy theories are also useful for bestowing a symbolic efficiency on the ‘we’ as opposed to the ‘them’ which they are resisting against. As she argues, “insofar as practitioners can link together varieties of disparate phenomena to find patterns of denial, occlusion and manipulation, conspiracy theory, far from a label dismissively attached to the lunatic fringe, may well be a vehicle for political contestation” (Dean 1998:8). This also echoes Dean’s wider politics (see chapter 4) in that she sees conspiracy theories as potentially helping to create meaningful *collective* discourse and narrative that define a ‘we’, suggesting that “the so-called distributions and imaginative leaps of conspiracy theory may be helpful tools for coding politics in the virtual relations of the techno-global information age” (1998:144) therefore establishing a collectivity who “don’t know

what ‘they’ are up to” or “more precisely, the fantasy of a ‘we’ is held open through the suspicion that there are secrets” (2002:97).

A number of Occupy (in) London activists also took a similar position that defended conspiracy theories as useful for resistance. For instance, in the first place, many argued that conspiracy theories were simply *accurate* in describing the nature of power:

“Because that’s the *arrogance* of politicians, they think they can do whatever. They call it democracy! How is it a democracy when 2 million people go on the streets and say: ‘we’re totally against sending troops to Afghanistan/Iraq...’ they go on the streets; and they totally ignore them. And this is yet called a democracy? I think democracy is a name for *tricking people* right? I think its erm... democracy doesn’t exist anywhere in the world at the moment.” (2012:8)

“There’s a *collective narrative* that goes on as well... about how we take shit for so long and then we *rise up* against the dictator or the evil king or stuff like this... To that extent, this can be part of what Occupy is doing. It’s, y’know, for it to go round the world so quickly, there must be something like a collective meme or something... I mean, what does conspiracy mean anyway? If two people get together to agree a plan on something, that’s a conspiracy!” (2014:5)

Or secondly, occupiers also defended conspiracy theories because they *revealed* something about the problems of the current political system:

“It’s that feeling that something’s wrong and that you don’t like the current system. Yet... because you are in the current system, you’re so engulfed in it, it’s very hard to find a way to resist it, or to you know... ‘cause in a way it’s not really just enough to resist... yeah sure, you have to start tearing its logic apart.” (2012:11)

“If you can easily suspect a government of doing that sort of thing, then it’s bad enough. If you can imagine them doing it, then it’s bad already because it means they have the *capability* of doing it!” (2014:6)

Or, for others still, conspiracy theory was useful for Occupy (in) London because there was always a grain of 'truth' to any such critique of power (even if the narrative itself was inaccurate):

"Questioning the status quo, looking for alternatives, looking for one that's more positive so the outcomes effect... the general public, as far as they're not the 1% you know? Being really critical of the way that... it seems that *governments are lobbied* and these *think tanks exist by corporations* and there's things like that influence government... well government seems to be influenced by corporations." (2012:15)

"The other thing I think about this conspiracy thing is that, it's *contemporary myth*, if you like, it's *always rooted in something*. I looked into this awhile back, I looked into rumour and the sociological functions of rumour, and urban legends always point to something... some kind of *instinctive truth*. For example, there is an urban legend of crocodiles in the [New York] subways, and sociologists look at it and say: 'there is a clear mythical perspective that there are *great powerful forces under the surface that are dangerous* and moving around'. And I really think that's got some weight to it, the kind of narrative we come up with, *the reptilian overlords, the bloodsucking aristocrats*... I mean, that's very symbolic." (2014:7)

These activists therefore seem to echo Birchall and Dean's sentiments that conspiracy theory is useful for resistance as something that reveals the 'arrogance' and 'unaccountability' of 'them' (supposedly democratic representatives), as well as offering a narrative which allows collective ideas of 'rising up' that reflect grievances over the corporate influence on neoliberal governments or the suspicion of some kind of powerful forces operating beneath surface appearances.

On the other hand, however, whilst I do not necessarily mean to disagree with the above defence of conspiracy theory, it is my contention below that we nevertheless need to critically question the use of such narratives for resistance. Whilst conspiracy theories might be useful up to a point, they perhaps present more problems than opportunities for politics, and in the next section I will demonstrate

this by going through various instances and examples of conspiracy theory within Occupy (in) London, sketching the potential foreclosures of using conspiracy theory to construct understandings of power and resistance.

## **The powers that be**

In this section, I will argue that the use of conspiracy theories to frame and structure power suggests a number of potential foreclosures of the possibilities of resistance, insofar as they potentially lead to: (1) a cynical model of 'truth' as unconcealedness which self-marginalises those resisting; (2) a further bolstering of the libertarian paranoia towards state and collectivities; and (3) a division and distrust between activists. In order to think about these problems I will use conspiracy theories on three different areas, international and trans-historical power, collusion between state and corporate power (1%), and undercover police. As such, to reiterate, my intention is not to speak towards the accuracy or falsity of these theories, but what their structuring of power as something hidden and nefarious *does* in framing resistance.

Whilst suspicions that there was some elite, international and trans-historical network operating behind the scenes were seen as quite extreme ideas in the context of Occupy (in) London, therefore, these narratives nevertheless reflected a more general tendency to talk of power as 'them' – 'the powers that be' or 'those who pull the strings' – that were vaguely understood to be operating beyond the limits of perception. Subsequently, what particularly struck me about these grander narratives, was the 'everydayness', 'common sense' and casual matter-of-fact

manner in which such enormous global networks were being invoked. For instance, as one activist complained:

“I worked at the info-tent at Occupy London [LSX] for a long time and I’d have people coming to me (thinking I was some kind of authority because I was standing behind a desk) saying: ‘I’ve got some *YouTube* videos for you...’ – ‘Great, what are they about?’ – ‘Well, did you know that 9/11 didn’t actually happen?’ You got it *all the time*! And I can’t just say that that’s down to *ignorance*, this idea of Rothschilds, the Illuminati, the ‘all-seeing eye’... just because there was an icon somewhere near the camp in Occupy London, everyone being like: ‘yeah, we’ve been infiltrated’.” (2014:8)

What this activists suggests, therefore, is that such narratives were a regular occurrence, something which happened ‘all the time’ and were considered by many to be simply common sense understandings in the way power operated. What’s more, that the alleged appearances of the Illuminati icon near the camp was enough to prove the worst (‘yeah, we’ve been infiltrated’) was similar to an experience I also had whilst attending the rally at Trafalgar Square. An activist approached me who I had not met before, brandishing a camera phone with a picture of the Illuminati’s ‘all-seeing eye’ (which he claimed to have taken in the window of a police van nearby) and for him, the logo was enough evidence to prove what he already knew to be fact: that the police were conspiring with the Illuminati.

The mundane invocation of such international conspiratorial networks therefore meant that they were simply treated as obvious, that it was blatant for all to see that there were global powers operating against the movement, and that anyone who didn’t realise this simply needed to ‘wake up to the truth’. Another activist, for instance, found evidence for the existence of this power in movies, attributing their secrecy to the fact that people were simply ignoring the flagrant clues therein:

“They’re [the people] being subliminally programmed through this stuff already so when the *change* happens the thoughts are there. Films like *Avatar* are out there and whatever, that’s put there by the Illuminati *obviously* and the *truth is in it*.” (2012:6)

“Like that’s their way of telling us... like... well putting the *truth in front of our eyes* (like *The Matrix*) and there’s loads of other films like that that are like, you know, it’s *blatantly put in front of your face* but most people see it as sort of like, you know, it’s just a film or whatever.” (2012:6)

“Yeah well, behind ‘V’ [*V for Vendetta*] there’s a good message and the people who have made those films which are *controlled by the masonry* or whatever... they put that out there for a reason.” (2012:6).

Once more, we find an emphasis here on the ‘obviousness’ of the conspiracy, the ‘truth in front of our eyes’ which we refuse to recognise. Not only is there suspected to be a secret all-powerful agency at work behind appearances, but they are in fact subtly telling us the truth in order to prepare for ‘the change’ (i.e. the establishment of the New World Order). Therefore, whilst most people would not notice the clues and believe the truth in front of their eyes, he had spotted the clues in *Avatar*, *The Matrix* and *V for Vendetta* as a double-bluff by the powers-that-be, and was now trying to warn people of them.

On the other hand, however, while some emphasise the obviousness of such conspiracies, others appeared to be more self-conscious and were clearly aware that referring to such discourses might lead them to be dismissed as non-sense. As such, there were often attempts to add credibility to theories using evidence, sources, and appeals to common sense. One activist in particular (who had found himself somewhat excluded from Occupy because of his extreme theories) was keen to educate me about the truth behind the annual Bilderberg conferences:



“We’re being fed a lot of *lies*. If you know that a lot of the plans for wars we’ve seen over the last decade were laid in the previous decade, then there is a plan, things don’t just happen. Are you familiar with Bilderberg? The annual meetings? Well, two years ago, if people mentioned to me ‘Bilderberg’ I’d say you don’t need to talk about Bilderberg or the Illuminati or whatever, you just need to look at the system, because if you mention the word ‘Bilderberg’ people *regard you as a conspiracy theorist*. I would actually say this is changing. And this year for the first year, the mainstream media actually did serious reporting from outside Bilderberg.” (2013:12)

While the appeal to mainstream media as a source of legitimacy is slightly inconsistent given that many activists (including, as I will show below, this one) saw the media as in collusion with such power anyway; this reference to ‘serious reporting’ should nevertheless be recognised as an attempt to pre-empt criticism towards his theory by referring to something widely distributed as a credible authority and source. He continued by describing the Bilderberg conference as a coalition of interests – financial, political, industrial, including the military and the media – who were colluding in secret to make decisions of global significance. In order to provide further evidence for this, he cited the attendance list of the 2012 conference:

“But if you look at the sequence of events, the people who are involved, last year, who was at Bilderberg in Chantilly? Kodmani, Bassma Kodmani, who was part of the ‘Free Syrian Liberation Movement’! So *clearly* what was being organised in Syria, she was being brought in to talk about that. So these things are *orchestrated*. People imagine they just happen – that the Arab Spring just happens or whatever it may be – but these things are *carefully marshalled*.” (2013:12)

That the attendees included a member of the Syrian National Council was enough evidence that the events in Syria were being centrally controlled by the conference, with the implication being that his was not simply some irrational speculative

theory of power, but the hidden truth of the reach of Bilderberg which could be detected in the smallest details, clues, slips and pieces of evidence.

Another activist also sought to add credibility to her understanding of power with an appeal to ‘common sense’, pointing out how she used to be ‘just like me’ (someone who she supposed did not believe in conspiracy theories) until she woke up and discovered the truth:

“And you start to think... ok, you thought it was a ‘conspiracy theory’, but then you find out: ‘actually...’ And you only find these things when people start talking and a number of things like Bilderberg, the 147 corporations that control the economy of the world (and actually it’s been *proven each time*). And unfortunately some of our guys go for the ‘conspiracy side’ – like the Bilderberg or the Rothschilds and everything else – you find out that the conspiracy side of Morgan Chase, Warburtons, Rothschilds... they’re not listed in the *Forbes* magazine. The 147 corporations have been proven by *New Scientist* in an article back in 2011. So you start to think: ‘ok, there’s actually a bunch of people that are hidden out there, maybe?’ I don’t *know*; but at least we *know something*.” (2014:12)

Not only does this suggest a biographical appeal to truth – that she is someone who ‘became convinced’ in an appropriately rational manner and found out the concealed truth through careful consideration and investigation – but the referrals to legitimate sources (that something being in the *New Scientist* or missing from *Forbes* was a good test for the truth) also demonstrated a certain reliance on pre-existing distributions of reliable evidence to make her claims.

The way in which evidence for conspiracy appeared empirically (i.e. became ‘sensible’) is therefore relevant to the way in which such theories framed power and resistance, as for many, the mainstream media could not be trusted at face

value to report on such power (being already part of the conspiracy) *and yet* was regularly seen as offering evidence and clues:

“Right, obviously the public’s ideas are shared by what’s in the newspapers or on the radio, on television and everything like that. So there’s *always a campaign against, you know, dissent*, alright? I don’t know who leads these campaigns, but crooks, thieves and liars (and I think *Rupert Murdoch* is one of the biggest of those).” (2012:8)

“Not that there is any ‘one brain’ of capitalism; but the *powers that are out there* to protect themselves were able to use that [media] as a means of defence. To show them in a bad light – Occupy – to show them in a bad light.” (2013:1)

“I think one of the geniuses of the modern information deluge system is that the real conspiring that goes on and is operative in the world is diluted in a sea of *so many stories of conspiracy that the actual conspiracy is very difficult to distinguish*.” (2014:3)

There is a certain inconsistency here, therefore, in that at the same time as there is a cynical distrust of appearances and information provided by the media, they were nevertheless being offered as a *source* for that evidence and information. What’s more, because the mainstream media were seen as part of the conspiracy itself in having a concerted campaign to distribute movements like Occupy as ‘non-sense’, this was taken as evidence that the ‘powers that be’ were out there using the media to defend themselves, purposefully giving movements bad publicity, or by creating an information deluge which disguised the actual truth of conspiracy.

This logic led to quite a confusing conclusion by the activist who emphasised Bilderberg to me above:

“The world of misinformation is very complex. Alex Jones rants on about Bilderberg and a few other things, as does David Icke, both those people also say a lot of other things which may or may not have credibility to them. So does that undermine the whole rationale of what they say about

Bilderberg? No it doesn't. But you know, we live in a very high impact information age, so trying to separate out messages which are cloaked within stuff that may not be true is quite difficult. Just because *Fox News* says one thing doesn't make it untrue, but a lot of other things they're saying may be untrue." (2013:12)

Relying on a cynical model of truth as unconcealedness (*aletheia*), this activist sees clues and hints for conspiracy to be subtle and incomplete, which *adds* to the evidence of their existence. Furthermore, even instances of apparent revelation – such as when Jones, Icke or *Fox News* actually do portray the truth – are taken as further proof of an even deeper and wider conspiracy which always retreats anew. As such, there is a constant and perpetual retreat of the truth, which in turn makes the self-nominated task of conspiracy theorists to uncover that truth never-ending. Or, in the words of one activist, the aim is to “sort of peel back the curtain or try to peel back the Monopoly board and seeing if there was... if there is anything underneath” (2012:3).

The first problem with this method of framing power, I suggest, is that it operates within the predominant distribution and presupposition as to what counts as the truth or *who* can legitimately possess sensible, rational and reasonable truth. By relying on a never-ending search for empirical evidence and clues to corroborate claims, as well as the idea that truth is something which needs to be ‘uncovered’, conspiracy theories may unwittingly sustain the boundaries of the ‘sensible’. Or, as Dean writes in her research on UFO theorists, believers “tended to reinforce official assumptions about who or what can be credible because ufology wants to convince political and scientific authorities of the claims” (2002:42). In other words, in their effort to make their theories appear sensible, these activists appeared to support

the very cynical model of power which designated them as non-sense in the first place, by reasserting that distribution of the sensible.

Or to put this differently, such appeals to narratives of endless and untouchable power lend themselves to distributions of the sensible that *marginalise* the conspiracy theorist in the first place and thereby indicate a potential *accepting* of their designation as ‘non-sensible’ or as not possessing authority. Such constructions of resistance – faced with powerful insurmountable hidden networks – seem to revel in marginality and exclusion, suggesting a counter-productive tendency to form a ‘we’ which is “always morally correct, never politically responsible” (Dean 2009:6), pre-positioning activists as self-righteous and morally superior martyrs or authentic underdogs in a position of authentic exclusion. As such, conspiracy theorists seem to play into their own self-defeat by positioning themselves as acting against an insurmountable power supposed to be operating behind the scenes. By placing power in a position always once-removed and retreating from accountability, they become an immortal agency which only adds to activist feelings of marginality, powerlessness and disillusionment that come with that cynical reason. Indeed, such a framing of power seems to foreclose resistance by seeming to reduce their activism to “politely asking for the political leadership of the country and the corporate financial system to change, to clean up their act and to be less beastly to the global poor” (Winlow & Hall 2012b:10).

Indeed, in conspiracy narratives that directly concerned the close relationship between neoliberal governments, corporate interests and the international financial system, this seemingly futile appeal to power to ‘be less beastly’ seems to

have become a default position. What is particularly at stake in such governmental conspiracies, of course, is that corporations are seen as operating against the democratic legitimacy of elected parliaments, making decisions which are directly benefiting the market whilst undermining the sovereignty or agency of the people. In the language of Occupy, this disproportionate sway of corporate interests in the context of neoliberal normativity, is one that is captured by the idea that ‘1%’ which the ‘99%’ were opposing. What this upper percentile implies is a consistent and conspiracy power across state and economy, with the ability to make far-reaching decisions against the democratic will of the people in spite of being in a minority. For the London occupiers, the 1% was therefore seen as a cohesive and powerful ruling class who benefitted one another at the direct cost of wider society:

“But let us be under no illusions that *the ruling class* and their executives in government have got an armoury that they will use against us: we’ve seen that in various countries around the world.” (2012:8)

“I think Occupy is against exclusivity, yeah? Occupy’s promoting inclusivity... but I think that’s where we *left with the 1%*. I think we can be pretty sure that *the 1% who are in power* are not going to give up, not in the short term.” (2012:9)

“*Clearly the very powerful do conspire in their mutual interests* – and that’s why they are *the 1%* - but it’s because they conspire very effectively and they get together in Davos to work out some specific elements of that.” (2014:3)

Rather than being under illusions, these activists instead considered themselves to know the truth behind the 1%, the international ruling class and their executives in government, who will not give up easily (with armoury at their disposal) and who conspire effectively in their mutual interests. Indeed, while the 1% is meant as a critique of neoliberalism as a legitimising rationality for this type of power, it is

nevertheless framed alongside a certain suspicion that the ruling class are acting in cahoots, with anti-social nefarious intentions and are purposefully exploiting society.

Indeed, the utter hatred towards this despised group within the movement was repeatedly expressed in no uncertain terms, in particular with reference to revived post-crash concerns over tax avoidance, double standards, injustice and inequality:

“I think it’s a lot of things going on at the moment that *they* won’t give up lightly; and as far as I’m concerned, they can fuck off to the Cayman Islands and suck it...” (2012:9)

“The stock exchange hosts and supports all these *disgusting corporations* that are harming us in so many different ways and are *basically controlling our lives*. We have *so little say in stuff that affects us* and international trade is something that affects us all... the whole global capitalist system is something that affects us all.” (2013:6)

“[Austerity] is a deliberately designed programmed to slaughter your public services, to sell them off to people-in-power’s mates who run the utility company and the private services or whatever, and you know, funnel money out of people... and keep them so fucking hard at it, working, paying rent, being able to afford the bus, the food, everything else, dealing with all the other shit that’s going on...” (2013:9)

The disgusting corporations who stow their money in tax havens like the Cayman Islands are seen to be ‘basically controlling our lives’ at the cost of democratic accountability. What these activists indicate, in other words, is that they see the 1% as a cynical group who are acting with purposefully immoral intentions, with a desire not only to serve themselves but their own class, whilst undermining and exploiting society (rather than a group legitimised by neoliberalism as a socio-economic doctrine). As such, the tendency seems to be to make a pathology of the actions of the 1%, rather than offer a structural critique.

These attitudes were also echoed by the more libertarian members of Occupy (in London who saw politicians as either corrupting democratic governance, or as part of a parliamentary system which was fundamentally flawed anyway. In other words, the 1% were either seen as abusing democracy:

“And then, you know, in the news we see: ‘oh yeah, politicians, MPs, we’re going to give ourselves possibly ten grand [pay rise] because we think we’re worth it!’ And you think: ‘you cunts! You fucking wankers!’ There’s all this... all this kind of poverty going on (and we all know *the cabinet is supposed to be full of millionaires anyway*) and it’s just greed looking after itself!” (2013:1)

“We say ‘fuck you government, what you are doing is wrong’. We try to do here altogether, the people together (because you’re so fucking useless government!) We try to do it here in a way that’s a little more sensitive or sensible.” (2013:8)

Or, on the other hand, corrupt politicians colluding with corporate interests were seen as a predictable outcome of having a government *at all* (i.e. that leaders or the state were bound to act in this way):

“And the stuff in Westminster, that’s *not politics*. That’s not politics. And I’m bored of saying ‘politicians lie’ I mean we know that. I mean, in a sense, why are we still surprised by that?” (2013:4)

“Look what’s happened with the Tories and the Liberals and stuff. They’ll change these things and *hope we kind of forget by the next time around*. And even if an MP loses, the lobbyists aren’t going to care, are they? They’ll hedge their bets and they’ll bribe and lobby the next person who comes in, and *the system itself can’t really change that*.” (2013:14)

“This [Occupy] is the *disenfranchised* of this country. And the whole campaign for ‘none of the above’ would work by saying that *a vote for anything else is a vote for the 1%... which of course, in truth, is what it is*.” (2014:12)

Seeing MPs grant themselves pay rises or abuse the expenses system whilst the rest of the country were experiencing austerity – especially when so many in the



government were already from wealthy backgrounds – was seen as an unjust and insensitive abuse of an otherwise democratic system. However, on the other hand, others saw leadership, the state or collectivities as presupposed towards such problems. As such, these narratives explicitly demonstrates the disconnections felt by many towards decisions which were directly affecting their lives, but varied according to just how disenchanted they had become (as to whether the state could be reformed or was simply predisposed to nefarious ends).

Central to the cynical framing of the 1% and Occupy's resistance towards them, were therefore questions around whether Occupy (in) London should become a political party itself or advocate support for an existing party (such as the Green Party). This became particularly heated in the latter days of the campsites and especially when movements in Greece and Spain appeared to be working with mainstream parties (Syriza and Podemos respectively) with some success. For some, however, entering the 'halls of power' would necessarily mean a corruption of their authentic resistance, rendering it co-opted by a corrupted system which inevitably would support the 1%:

"I think Occupy as a whole didn't want us to be a political party. I think the point was that *the political system is part of the problem* and I think that's right." (2014:1)

"In terms of anything that veers towards *reformism or complicity* with the status quo of state organising; these aren't the models that solves the problems that Occupy was initially trying to address or trying to address from my point of view. So I don't think those reformist notions are productive, no." (2014:4)

"Why would we choose to work *within the frameworks* that are fundamentally, by their own structure, inherently causing these problems? Why would we choose to engage on that platform?" (2014:8)

“The brand is big enough that Occupy is perhaps the *only name that could challenge UKIP* or challenge to major parties and say there is a different way to do this. But then again, if we went into electoral politics, it would *lose an amount of innocence* and the innocence as seen by the public, the simplicity of the 99% and the 1%.” (2014:11)

When the political system is seen as itself the problem, or reformism is seen as complicity, then anything to do with the state (and by extension, parties or other collective institutions) become the object of libertarian suspicion and rejected in advance. As such, this forecloses the possibility of any alternative conceptualisation of what the state could be, seeing the extra-parliamentary character of the movement as adding to their authenticity (whilst working within the system would risk losing their innocence and becoming part of the 1%).

In contrast to this, however, others *did* see the forming of a political party or supporting an electoral alternative as central to changing the system from within, and bringing about a wider social change. As such, many regretted that Occupy (in) London seemed to miss their opportunity to do this:

“But I think at the heart of it needs to be a political party that people can have faith in. And parties *without spin doctors*. A party where you have just got people to be brave enough *just to be honest* about shit.” (2013:1)

“Yeah there’s that... but the more *level-headed and mature* people... I mean, ok, you have the *rebellious people* and a few good people can actually make changes, but unfortunately for that rebellion to succeed, you really need to actually have the majority of people. Suffragettes and civil rights movement didn’t do it by themselves, they ended up with politicians and unions and everybody else got involved. So you can say: ‘oh yeah, we’re here, we’re radical, we’re special... *you* can’t join.’ It’s like no, that’s ridiculous.” (2014:2)

“Well, when Occupy was happening, I was dead against it. When it was a camp, it seemed to be really poisonous to go down that track. But now we’re trying to do things differently... well not differently... we’re trying to *promote ideas rather than just be against other ideas*. It seems *immature to discard the state*. But having said that, I’m not sure I’d want to engage with

the state via political parties... I don't know if there is another way because this is actually a huge hole in my activism... it's a big hole and I'd like to address it. I kind of think the *Green Party* has some very positive things it wants to do..." (2014:10)

While these activists are therefore less cynical of the state, they nevertheless argue that there needed to be a different *sort* of party, which was more transparent and without the tendency towards secrecy or double-bluffs using spin doctors.

However, we also see a certain authority creep in here, with a comparison between 'level-headed' or 'mature' members of the movement and the simply 'rebellious' who think they are 'special' (we will return to this problem in the final section).

However, the problem this presents (and what is truly at stake in more cynical conceptualisation of government) is that they (once again) miss the way in which this extends the paranoid libertarian norms and justifications of neoliberalism. As an attempt to create a social organisation which does not rely on the necessity of state decisions (by allowing the market, supported by the state, to organise and make decisions 'freely') neoliberalism also sees the state as predisposed to conspiring against the freedom and liberty of individuals. As such, the cynical presupposition that the state is oppressive is a gesture which libertarians on both the Left and the Right actually agree on, playing into the pervasiveness of this idea and *foreclosing any possibility of an alternative organisation of the state*.

What's more, the discussion over whether Occupy should or should not enter the apparatus of government in order to bring about change hinges on an overly-simplistic equation of power, seeing it as something 'they' hold and 'we' do not have (resembling the Hollywood paranoia of popular culture where "the enemy is

‘the system’, the hidden ‘organisation’, the anti-democratic ‘conspiracy’” (Žižek 2011b:170). By constructing power in this way, resistance is not only (once again) reduced to a futile appeal to power to change itself; but also forecloses the possibility of much more reflexive critique of their own complicity with distributions of power. Indeed, the desire ‘not to become one of them’ and remain ‘one of us’ encourages further cynicism towards the 1% rather than allowing a more structural critique, because “if I choose to read an event through the discourse of conspiracy theory, this will determine my agenda... I will find sinister rather than structural reasons for unanswered questions” (Birchall 2006:49).

For instance, one of the more sinister explanations given for the fracturing and dividing of Occupy (in) London, was that fellow activists were actually undercover agents who were purposefully attempting to corrupt the movement and break it apart. As a number of cases have demonstrated – perhaps the most infamous being ‘Mark Stone’ who took part in an environmental group as an undercover officer for 7 years – the police do not consider it beyond their legitimate power to use undercover agents in order to infiltrate and monitor social movements. However, what this created within the movement was a certain speculative conspiracy theory of who this might be, making it difficult to trust others with sensitive information about direct action, as well as presenting problems around who should be included in important decisions about the movement’s organisation or appearance.

Spotting ‘clues’ and ‘slips’ by undercover agents who were pretending to be activists subsequently became something of a sport within Occupy (in) London:

“Well I mean, there are *probably infiltrators on the site* – obviously we can’t know who it is – but I have more respect for people... the infiltrators who actually have to sleep in wet tents and stuff and live on hardly any food. It was funny at St Paul’s, you know, people with no money *somehow got fuller of face*, seemed to be getting *wider*.” (2012:7)

“I think there is a possibility that capitalism may try to infiltrate this [movement] to cause problems and things like that, but if that happens, *I am absolutely certain that we’ll seek them out* and send them on their way.” (2012:8)

“But Occupy was *certainly infiltrated* by this. I wouldn’t have much problem naming who they were, but there might have been one that I missed. And they’re always good fun doing the work, *we feed them rubbish information to take back!* [laughs].” (2014:11)

As with the international networks, therefore, it was taken as read that there were definitely infiltrators within the movement, with clues such as ‘getting fuller of face’ despite the lack of food’ being seen as tell-tale signs. Others ‘slips’ included those who turned up with expensive tents and brand new sleeping bags, arriving in pairs (including two activists who had turned up wearing matching socks), or wearing black boots.

However, for some activists, this infiltration was not completely negative, in that government interest in their resistance demonstrated the legitimacy and importance of their activism:

“*They’re all over us!* They’re studying hard what we’re doing. They’re studying Occupy and they’re infiltrating the squats and they’re spending multi-million pounds to get inside our heads, our motivations, and find out what it is we want to do, how we plan to do it, and the dangers of how that could spread (because if it does spread, they’re in real shit!). And they know this because they know how much they’re going to cut and they know how desperate people will become, they’re going to increasingly pump money into security and politicking and military and surveillance to quell further unrest.” (2013:11)

“You know there was infiltrators at various levels. You’ve got MI6 around the corner you know, because of Anonymous being there as well, there was CIA (and it was actually mentioned in court, CIA involvement).” (2013:13)

“No, I mean, there’s always been undercover police in every left-wing organisation. Even the right-wing organisations (even though they’d be more sympathetic to the right-wing organisations).” (2014:11)

The police are therefore thought to have a well-resourced secret agenda to study the movement in order to understand their plans and prevent the resistance from spreading. Part of this theory were also those organisations who are associated with conspiracy in popular culture – such as the British and American secret services – who were seen as an appropriately high-level response to the concern they were causing to the 1%.

The distrust of one another which this brought about, however, clearly led to issues of division, preclusion and hierarchy within the movement, and even stretched to me as a researcher. Turning up to the protests, camps or interviews with a tape recorder, notepad and consent form was enough for many to suspect me as having bad intentions towards the movement, seeing me as either undercover police, or an agent of the government or Illuminati (at least one activist admitted to checking me out online before the interview). But I was not alone in being treated with suspicion and one activist described to me the way he had been treated when he had attempted to join the movement:

“I mean, even the same way you got in contact with me, I thought: ‘ok, maybe they’ve sent this guy to me to find out if I’m kosher?! Because it does make you start to think like that...” (2012:15)

“When I went to the actual meeting, these people who were facilitating the meeting I found very cold. *I felt there was a real wariness towards me.*” (2012:15)

"I voiced my concern, saying: 'look, I think some of these people might think I'm some sort of undercover agent, they might think I'm press, you know?' I've come out of nowhere, I've turned up, I've said can I get involved... yeah maybe they think I'm police or press or you know? And he said... I can't actually remember what he said, I can't remember whether he said 'maybe' or 'not sure'." (2012:15)

This wariness was a direct result of the theories of undercover police conspiracy and not only lead to the preclusion of newcomers, but also towards a debilitating and fracturing distrust between all those within the movement:

"I think there's *a lot that goes on that we have no knowledge about*... I think that uncover policing thing... *people are bound to get paranoid about that* because there have been so many revelations and a lot of... I mean *people's trust has been destroyed*." (2014:1)

"Sometimes when you get too well known, then people *start accusing you of being a police officer* and that is damaging as it can land you in trouble sometimes. If they bad-mouth you to other people; then you're going to be suspected." (2014:2)

"There was certainly an inordinate amount of conversation about undercover agents and such... some people were *obsessed* with it and many people were accused of being one." (2014:12)

The 'obsession' with police conspiracy therefore led to a paranoia and destruction of trust, with accusations that people were undercover police becoming a common occurrence. Not only did this lead to fragmentation (with cliques forming around those who shared suspicions of others) but it also had the further effect of preventing organisation of direct action as people could no longer be trusted to share information.

Such distrust also had a direct effect on the distribution of power within the movement, as it created legitimate reasons for some to corner themselves off from the General Assembly and make their own private decisions on behalf of the others.

What's more, even within the GA, accusations of undercover police also gave a number of people a 'zero-level' argument in open debates, letting them hang on to their own individualised views:

“I mean, if anyone could be a copper, then as soon as you see anything that anyone is doing as counter-productive to the movement (*as per your vision of it*)... ‘hang on a minute, you’re a cop! That’s why you’re doing this because you want to fuck everything up!’ (2014:3)

As such, the “simplification of power to be found in paranoid rhetoric” seemed to enable a number of activists “to produce ‘knee-jerk’ reactions to anything that threatens their belief system” (Birchall 2006:89), one again foreclosing an equal negotiation over the movement’s identity and appearance (see chapter 4). The unfalsifiable base level justification that someone was only disagreeing because they had nefarious intentions and were trying to cause division within the movement, was being used to hold onto pre-held positions and dogmatic beliefs, rather than allowing for a collective reflexivity on more structural critiques of power. In other words, instead of allowing a view to be challenged, the suspicion and accusation of undercover agents supplied stubbornness in the last instance, allowing individuals to be unrelenting in their own point of view.

As such, it could be argued that there did not actually *need* to be undercover police in the movement for any damage to be done, as the theory itself was enough to spread insecurity and suspicion amongst the activists that caused them to divide. Indeed, as was pointed out by others, this cynicism did more damage to Occupy (in) London than any potential leaks of information to the police:



“For me, *there’s a very strong discomfort in being distrustful*. We want to be a movement of the 99% and include people who look a bit different and don’t really turn up to these kinds of things. But *if we immediately treat them as coppers, then they’re not going to feel welcome etc...* It’s the threat of those things *more than the reality* that does the damage.” (2014:3)

“As far as I’m concerned, I’m not interested in undercover cops or anything else, because I’m not planning to do anything wrong. I’m very well aware that some of the things I’m prepared to do are officially illegal and I could be criminalised as a result. However, in my mind, I haven’t done anything wrong. I’m trying to protest something much more important and I’m happy to stand by that, so I don’t care who knows what I’m up to. I really couldn’t care less about it, I mean what is there to care about?” (2014:12)

For the first activist, the problem was that the distrust of newcomers limited and foreclosed the movement’s potential identity, arguing that the *theory* of infiltration did more damage to their resistance than the reality itself. And for the second, they simply decided to ignore the threat altogether, stating that they are not interested in what the police know (and suggesting that others should not care either).

One account about the potential damage of conspiracy theories stood out from the rest, coming as it did from an activist who compared her experiences of Occupy (in) London with Greenham Common (the infamous women’s peace camp against nuclear weapons in the 1980’s). In her account of conspiracy and infiltration, she describes a theory which became popular at Greenham after a ‘newcomer’ had arrived and spread a story that the Russians had developed a new type of weapon which could cause physical illness using microwaves:

“The nickname for this microwave bombardment was ‘zapping’ and she said ‘zapping’ was going on at Greenham. Within short order, numbers of *women started leaving the camp and becoming ill...* and I used to say: ‘well, I haven’t been zapped!’ It was supposed to happen... you’d be sitting around the fire and somebody would say: ‘I’ve been zapped!’ And I’d think, really?” (2014:12)

Interestingly, what this activist went onto suggest was a kind of meta-conspiracy theory, which had been purposefully spread by the police through this newcomer, in order to try and break up the camp at Greenham. Years after the camp, she had been invited to take part in a documentary on the subject with an ex-intelligence officer who was (allegedly) going to confirm as much: that the idea of ‘zapping’ had in fact been a myth spread by the police. However:

“The programme got pulled a day later, to a huge amount of disturbance on behalf of TV critics who said it was going to be a great programme and why was it being taken off the air? And certainly in my own mind, it’s because this guy was going to say it’s an exercise in psychological warfare! And I think that’s quite interesting in terms of conspiracy theories, because it’s a double-bluff isn’t it!”(2014:12)

Whether this meta-conspiracy is true or not, therefore, it nevertheless suggests how potentially problematic such cynical theories are in creating distrust and division within the movement, causing more damage as myths than they potentially could as actual surveillance.

In this section, I have demonstrated how conspiracy narratives do indeed create that ‘us’ and ‘them’ binary which Dean suggests, but I have problematized this by suggesting that the cynical nature of this relationship bring about further foreclosures of resistive possibility. Indeed, conspiracy theories seem to have a certain effect on this relationship, insofar as “for the conspiracy theorist, the ‘cover-up’ acts as a *homogenising agent* to present the image of a corrupted ‘them’ and a romanticised and radical ‘us’, as well as a lived socio-political reality” (Birchall 2006:46 *emphasis added*). In other words, by creating connections between various grievances and pinning them to a power operating behind the scenes, there is a

tendency to dismiss contingency in favour of conspiracy, making power appear totalising, hidden, insurmountable and permanent. Regardless of their accuracy or falsity, therefore, I have suggested that conspiracy theories are a problematic construction of power and resistance. Firstly, I argued that they indicate a certain complicity with distributions of what 'counts' as truth (and who is designated as being able to 'know' it) which play into the partitioning of activists as a marginal, powerless and 'non-sensible' appearance. Secondly, it was argued that conspiracy theories once again play into the libertarian logic that justifies the neoliberal paranoia and cynicism towards the state, foreclosing any alternative possibility of what the state could be. And finally, it was pointed out how conspiracy theory can break apart solidarity and limit possibilities of equal negotiation within the movement, creating distrust and uneven distributions of power. Having made these criticism, however, I now want to move on to demonstrating how the dismissal of conspiracy theorists is *just as problematic* as their formulation in the first place.

## **Against the cynics' cynics**

While my aim in the previous section was to demonstrate the potential shortcomings of using conspiracy theory to construct understandings of power and resistance; this should not be simply read as an agreement with those who seek to dismiss conspiracy theory altogether. Such cynics' cynics, I argue, are *just as* problematic as that which they seek to dismiss, in that they tend to police which knowledges and grievances should 'count' as sensible and legitimate (and which should not) *in-line* with prevailing distributions. In this section, I will show how the

critics of conspiracy theorists within the movement (who repeat the common and widespread disregarding attitudes towards conspiracy theory from wider discourse) are just as problematic for resistance, as those cynical constructions of power in the first place.

Furthermore, this section will also illustrate that conspiracy theory was by no means an ‘all-encompassing’ characteristic of the movement and that a number of activists remained incredibly dismissive of people they considered to be ‘conspiracy theorists’:

“The idea of ‘conspiracy theories’ is that they veer so heavily to a point where... *not necessarily ignorance*... but you can’t prove nor disprove them, so therefore you still entertain them if you want to... and I think this is a really *manipulative imposition* that occurs on spaces as well.” (2014:4)

“What a lot of these people that believe in conspiracy theories have is this idea of the world’s not going to change, it’s not going to change, especially in my lifetime, we haven’t even begun to think about revolutionary moments and organisation yet because we’re still struggling over basic nonsense topics [i.e. conspiracy theory]. So what’s the point? Should I just go home and hide under my covers?” (2014:8)

“I’ve become more and more *sceptical* of conspiracy theories, because I’ve found that they *accumulate in certain heads*. People get to know one; then start to believe lots of them. They tend not to believe one or two, but *loads* of conspiracy theories. And I think often its *misdirected critical thinking*. We don’t need a conspiracy theory, I mean the conspiracy is staring us right in the face!” (2014:9)

Here, conspiracy theories are seen as not necessarily an *ignorance* on behalf of their proponents, but as representing non-sense, un-falsifiability and a manipulation of truth. What’s more, they are seen to be something which a ‘certain type’ of individual are perhaps more vulnerable towards, accumulating in ‘certain

heads' and indicating a *misdirected* critical thinking on behalf of those who they considered not to have critical faculties.

Very often, therefore, such dismissals were linked to a presupposition on where the lines of rationality and reason were, leading critics to question the sanity and sense of conspiracy theorists, seeing them as having crossed a line into mere speculation:

"People with *mental health issues* really hurt the movement by turning against each other and turning people against each other with *crazy* conspiracy theories." (2014:6)

"I think [conspiracy theory] is *counterintuitive*. That's my articulate way of saying *retarded*. It's completely counterintuitive and *intellectually lazy*." (2014:10)

"I don't think I'd buy... I think there are people in Occupy, people who *believe all sorts of things*. I suppose you could say it's become a *home for political nutters*." (2014:11)

Here conspiracy theorists are thought to be not only 'non-sense' but close to insanity, seeing such narratives of power as a result of 'mental health issues' or 'craziness'; as 'intellectually lazy' or typical of 'political nutters' who are uncritical and would believe all sorts of things.

For these critics, therefore, what conspiracy theorists were lacking was an accurate understanding of what actually 'counts' as objective or legitimate 'truth'. They are seen to be in error because they think things are 'happening' (when the 'truth' is that they are not) and therefore they create speculations *without* adhering to 'scientific' principles of reason or rationality:

"You also have people who say: 'oh, where's my tinfoil hat?!' They actually *do not believe it even though the facts are there already*... You give them *verifiable* details like the 1400 billionaires, the 85 individuals and 147 corporations who control GDP, so what's the point of talking about *things*

*you can't prove* like the Rothschilds, Morgans and whoever else? Because you're going to have problems with the *real facts* that we know already! Some people are just *wilfully ignorant*." (2014:2)

"I feel sorry for those people because it's not just out of ignorance, it's out of this idea of *knowing, sensing*, there's *something wrong* with society, the fabric of society, and *they don't really know* how to go about trying to process that line of thought. They don't know how to go out and *actually research* where this *objective truth* is, so they fall foul of these widespread narratives that really are more about *fear-mongering* than anything else." (2014:8)

Conspiracy theorists are designated as those who are 'wilfully ignorant' by not recognising the 'real facts' and verifiable details like numbers and statistics, demonstrating that the critics here see it necessary to empirically *prove* such theories of power (rather than speculate upon them). For the second activist, this 'ignorance' is attributed to simply not knowing how to do such rational research, and instead see such narratives a result of irrational fears and non-objective truth.

It is my contention that there are subsequently a number of problems with these criticisms of conspiracy theory. Firstly, it seemed that this was being utilised as a mark of authority and hierarchy within the movement, with some seeing themselves as possessing reasonable, rational, legitimate knowledge and authority, whilst others were dismissed as simply not having access or not possessing such faculties. Conspiracy theorists, in other words, were seen by these critics as being 'lesser activists' and therefore were designated as 'non-sense', which prevented them from being given equal voice or appearance within the movement. Once again, this unofficial hierarchy also became particularly acute and clearly spatialized in the rift between St Paul's and Finsbury Square:

“In Finsbury Square, I imagine they [conspiracy theorists] were very widespread, they were *much less widespread in St Paul’s*. Finsbury Square was very different... initially, to some extent, it functioned as a release valve to St Paul’s which was really under the mainstream media glare, and having to be that kind of ideal spectacle at the same time as this democratic space, and there were a lot of struggles in how to include people from the streets, so for a number of those people to go to Finsbury Square was *a very natural evolution*.” (2014:3)

“The slightly more *mainstream*, slightly more regular job elements of Occupy, are perhaps *less rife* with conspiracy theories than those who live in squats and spend a lot of time on the web and not working. I don’t know. Maybe that’s just a total prejudice assumption.” (2014:9)

What these activists invoke, then, is that there was a line of reason and rationality for some (i.e. those at St Paul’s, who could handle the pressure of media glare, that perhaps held a regular day job and did not spend too much time on the internet filling their head with ‘non-sense’) which was not shared by conspiracy theorists who allegedly congregated at Finsbury Square or the squats.

The problem with drawing this line, of course, is that those who do the drawing immediately presuppose themselves as an authority above such irrational others. Indeed, as Dean points out, “those in positions of power deploy terms like ‘reasonable’ and ‘rational’” (1998:9) because the judgement and designation of proper (sensible) truth is from those who consider themselves in closer proximity to understanding it. The critic of conspiracy theorists therefore created problematic distributions within the movement, foreclosing the potential of a more equal democratic process or a negotiation of identity boundaries. As such, where some sought to express their resistance in terms of conspiracy theory, others sought to disregard their grievances in equal measure by arguing that they were simply false and facetious.

As well as this foreclosure of organisational possibility, however, another problem with the criticism of conspiracy theorists is that they also revealed a certain complicity with the prevailing distribution of the sensible in society, by reiterating and appealing to normative logics in order to designate what counts as legitimate truth. In particular, the criticism brought towards conspiracy theorists was that they were formulating their ideas in disregard to the established ‘common sense’ way of making a truth claim. But, as Foucault argues, the very *idea* that there is something called ‘truth’ in the first place can actually be shown as having a certain history and as based upon presuppositions, including who is able to speak, access or know that ‘truth’. As such, Foucault argues that truth is “not the operation that destroys appearance [*aletheia*]... it is what indefinitely constitutes the newness of appearance in the breach in appearance” (2013:205) and, subsequently, the very *idea* that truth is something concealed (rather than constructed) “rests on a network of relations” (2013:210). Or, to put it differently, Foucault is arguing that the common conceptualisation of truth as ‘unconcealedness’ (i.e. something to be revealed from behind appearances) is actually based on an Ancient Greek conceptualisation of truth as “something like the taking away, cancellation, or annihilation of concealment” (Detienne 1999:16). The problem, however, is that this overlooks the way in which truth is actually being *constructed* at the point of disclosure, pointing us back towards Nietzsche who “finds that there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence” (Foucault 1977:142).

This model and distribution over what ‘counts’ as truth remains prevalent in society and maintains hierarchies of authority and expertise between those who have the



privileged skills, abilities or authority to 'know' and those who are delivered from such information. It is my contention, therefore, that both the cynicism of conspiracy theory (that the truth of power is behind appearances) *and* the critics of conspiracy theorists (that fancy themselves as authorities on the hidden truth of power) are complicit with this distribution of the sensible. By presupposing that truth is unconcealedness, both groups therefore play into the modernist idea of what counts as truth and who may access it, rather than recognising it as something which is a contingent *effect* of power and can therefore be challenged or disrupted.

## Conclusion

The frustration, stress, sleep deprivation, wet and cold weather, paranoia-inducing drugs, as well as an inability to care for those who suffered from mental illness, surely did not help alleviate the distrust of one another within Occupy (in) London and, as things began to fragment and people became more exhausted, accusations of being responsible for secretly compromising the movement became more and more common. Disagreements therefore were no longer the hallmark of healthy, inclusive, horizontal, democratic discussions or negotiations; but became evidence for the cynical disruption by conspiratorial powers, creating cliques, circles of trust and fragmentation.

To leave the account there, however, would be to do a disservice to the complexity and importance of conspiracy narratives and how they operate to frame cynical understandings of power. As such, rather than dismissing them outright (and playing into the designations of the movement as non-sense), it seems more

appropriate to recognise such theories as a direct outcome of the kinds of issues that Occupy (in) London were attempting to address: grievances of unaccountability and distance; the undemocratic and technocratic nature of the post-crash neoliberal state; the inequality of economic competition and the inauthenticity of capitalist culture. Indeed, it could be argued that conspiracy theories are a predictable consequence of *any* movement which “symbolically take to task the political leaders of the most powerful nation-states” as “this can go hand-in-hand – visually, rhetorically, and analytically – with the depiction of world leaders and their associates as secretive, undemocratic conspirators trying to take control of economic processes” (Schlembach 2014:18). In other words, conspiracy theories should be recognised as a direct result of a situation in which “movements must negotiate this discursive terrain where ‘politics’ is associate with the business or more or less corrupt elites” (Prentoulis & Thommassen 2013:172).

This chapter has sought to emphasis the problems that conspiracy theory presented for Occupy (in) London. Against the careful claims by Birchall and Dean that conspiracy theory could be potentially useful, it has been argued here that it may in fact present problems of: complicity with the dominant frameworks of what counts as ‘truth’; a further foreclosing collectivity through a libertarian distrust of the state; as well as creating distrust, fractionalisation and anti-democratic problems within movement’s organisation. As soon as one plays into such a *speculative* model of power-as-hidden-truth and resistance-as-marginal-authenticity, it seems one has already succumbed to a foreclosure by enlightened false consciousness. Such narratives, as I have argued above, remain problematic for the possibility of a politics which can radically disrupt the prevailing distribution of society, because

they remain complicit with those distributions of what counts as truth or who has access to it, What's more, conspiracy theories appear to reinforce a problematic self-marginalisation and futility on behalf of such activists, seeing themselves as the powerless against all-pervasive far-reaching and unsurpassable networks of power.

## 7. Conclusion: 'Let us be realistic and demand the impossible'

### Avoiding foreclosure

“...through madness, a work that seems to drown in the world, to reveal there its non-sense, and to transfigure itself with the features of pathology alone, actually engages within itself the world's time, masters it, and leads it; by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself.”

Michel Foucault (2001:273-4)

It has been the contention of this thesis, that the *possibility* of a politics which could create radical social change was *foreclosed* in the post-crash moment due to the normative reassertion of neoliberal capitalism and that this can be demonstrated through the presuppositions of those who wanted to bring that change about.

Playing on the ambiguities of the word 'sensible', I began by bringing out the nuances of Rancière's theory beyond the aesthetic and towards the lines of what may legitimately ('sensibly') appear (be 'sensible') within a given space and context.

In particular, the policed boundary of such legitimate aesthetic appearance after the crash was argued to have foreclosed even the *idea* of a possible radical alternative, rendering movements like Occupy (which sought to resist such a re-assertion and bring about change) limited from the start. Any argument *against* the reassertion of neoliberal consumer capitalism as the rational model of society, was therefore pre-distributed as impossible, as noise, and as aesthetically illegitimate.

Their appearance through the tactic of occupation, however, appeared to possess a radical *potential* by camping in a major centre of global finance (the City of London), outside a national 'moral' landmark (St Paul's) and an international economic

landmark (Paternoster Square Stock Exchange). By doing so, it was suggested that *Occupy (in) London had the potential to make their non-sense appear against their designation as such*, enforcing the appearance of their desire for a radical alternative *despite* such ideas being dismissed from the outset. What's more, Occupy (in) London were able to make the private nature of the market a public issue by juxtaposing their tents with the cathedral and the stock exchange, demonstrating the democratic deficit of a neoliberal system which seeks justification in the financial market and frames political agency in terms of consumer capitalism.

However, it was also argued that the persistence of this prevailing logic troubled the camp's appearance in other ways, such as the problematic tendency towards individualism and libertarianism within the movement that foreclosed the radical potential of 'we are the 99%' to organise collectively, consolidate symbolically and extend their cause under a universal identity. Not only did such individualised and libertarian values *extend* wider norms in society of what may or may not legitimately appear as a grievance (reducing concerns to individual expressions of identity and creating fragmentation, resentment and division within the movement), but it was also argued a certain fetishisation of *openness* and prefiguration as *outside* of predominant power structures foreclosed the possibility of a collective identity which was able to radically reflect upon exclusions (instead making the movement vague and inconsistent whilst unintentionally *precluding* those who *should have been included*). A certain tyranny of structurelessness therefore created uneven distributions *within* the movement that foreclosed any reflection and equal negotiation of their collective identity through the persistence

of wider structural inequalities. In other words, the wider distribution of the movement's appearance as 'non-sensible' was strengthened by distributions within the movement that prevented an organised, consistent and extended collective appearance.

This foreclosure by wider distributions and norms, I suggested, can also be paradoxically recognised in the pursuit of authenticity as an attempt to achieve a non-complicity with those structures. In the very endeavour to gain critical distance from capitalism and the market, I argued that activists who based their resistance as the pursuit of purity – for instance, through boycotting and buycotting – counter-intuitively ended up *extending* the logic of the market into their own understandings and actions. In the context of a new spirit of capitalism which incorporates its own critique, the resistance being raised by Occupy problematically extended the normativity of those very ideas which underpinned that which they were attempting to refigure. What's more, the pursuit of authenticity also repeated the problem of creating unintentional hierarchies, once again preventing the possibility for a meaningful negotiation on exclusions and distributions of power within the movement.

Finally, the penultimate chapter sought to look critically at the tendency to frame power and resistance in terms of cynical theories of conspiracy. Stretching the definition of what constitutes a conspiracy theory beyond its popular understanding, it was demonstrated how such narratives of hidden power present potential problems for contemporary movements, presupposing prevailing distributions of what 'counts' as truth and who is in a position of 'authority' and

able to access it (something also shared by the *critics* of conspiracy theorists) whilst leading to a self-marginalisation of their own position. Furthermore, however, these theories were also shown to further the libertarian distrust of collectivity, as well as creating division and distrust towards one another and any newcomers. Once again, therefore, it was argued that these narratives foreclosed the possibility of their resistance.

In sum, it has been argued that the political potentials and possibilities of occupation and ‘we are the 99%’ were ultimately *limited* by practical issues of disorganisation, fracturing, division, symbolic inefficiency and inconsistency; an unequal distribution of power within the movement that prevented a reflexive negotiation over their appearance and creating preclusions; as well as a qualitative limitation of their resistance to the movement itself. Furthermore, however (and underpinning all of these problems), has been the contention that Occupy (in) London was ultimately unable to resist the reassertion of neoliberalism and bring about change in the aftermath of the crash, because it was *foreclosed* by a common distribution of the sensible with that it was attempting to resist. By making the same assumptions about politics as those presupposed by neoliberalism – including the virtues of individualism, libertarianism, fetishized openness and structurelessness, the pursuit of authenticity and a cynical reading of power and truth – the movement was prevented from challenging, disrupting or changing those ‘givens’. Instead, I suggest that Occupy (in) London counter-intuitively reiterated and extended the normativity of those presuppositions after the crash, which inadvertently supported and reasserted neoliberalism as a ‘common sense’ distribution.

Shared across the arguments presented here, therefore, is the common theme of a foreclosure in contemporary society which limited the possibilities of radical social change *despite* the best efforts of Occupy (in) London activists. As such, it is my contention that these issues go some way to demonstrating why neoliberal capitalism was able to reassert itself in the wake of the financial crisis against such widespread opposition and resistance. This thesis was also meant, however, as a step towards a more *genealogical* politics that could reflect on such foreclosures by the distributions of the sensible. Yet, as I argued in chapter 2, this is also the politics that is precisely *dismissed* by the distribution of ‘what counts as politics’ in contemporary society. In order to escape this double bind, therefore, I will finish by returning to social theory and in particular the concepts of melancholia and the impossible.

## Leftist melancholia

Much of the critique which I have brought to Occupy (in) London – particularly around fetishism, authenticity and cynicism towards power – could be encapsulated by the idea of leftist melancholia. Taken from psychoanalysis, melancholia suggests that there is something counter-intuitively foreclosing the possibility of resistance, insofar as it romanticises *failure as a moral ideal*. The attempt to frame power as a conspiratorial, all-encompassing, untouchable 1%, for example, seems to play into the self-marginalisation and distribution of activists as ‘the powerless’, or as Dean writes “insofar as the protestors address their demands to a master and fail to assume their own claim to power, they end up *reinforcing*



rather than subverting the master's authority" (2009:84 *emphasis added*) because they are looking at themselves from the (imagined) position of the 'master's authority'. Or, as Butler similarly argues, "the effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that *uncritically mimics* the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms" (2006:18 *emphasis added*), meaning that such constructions of resistance and power which I have outlined above paradoxically *add* to the designation of their grievances and appearances as 'non-sense' by pre-positioning power as something insurmountable and unchallengeable.

In other words, not only do such discourses presuppose the distribution of the sensible, but they also foreclose the possibilities of resistance and radical social change by pre-positioning those resisting as the marginal and powerless. What Nietzsche might refer to as a 'cunning of impotence', therefore, seems to apply to contemporary activism insofar as "the oppressed, the downtrodden and violated tell themselves: 'let us be different from evil, that is, good!'... [but] when listened to coldly and without prejudice, this actually means nothing more than: 'we weak are, after all, weak: it would be good if we refrained from doing anything for which we lack sufficient strength'" (2008:30). Such *ressentiment* therefore pre-positions activists not only as marginal, but as possessing a *righteous indignation* by virtue of that marginality, wallowing in ineffectual authenticity yet seeing it as an "an election and a distinction" (Nietzsche 2008:31)<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, it seems that many within

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<sup>12</sup> It is this marginality as an 'election and distinction' which I think separates *melancholia* (as a problematic embrace of loss) with *nostalgia* (as revisiting the possibilities of the past, see Bonnett 2006). As such, these two terms should not be conflated, because whilst melancholia suggests a potential foreclosure of possibility; the defence of nostalgia is probably closer to what I describe as 'genealogical politics'.

Occupy (in) London were actually unwilling to assert their power to effect change, for (libertarian and prefigurative) fear that their resistance might become corrupted, impure and inauthentic, and therefore preferring “not to take the risk of winning [when]... defeat, at least, can’t be co-opted” (Foucault 1989:106).

On the other hand, however, it should be recognised that a number of occupiers *did* see a problem with self-marginalisation within the movement:

“So I get the feeling that they aren’t really sure about what they believe in and will *gravitate towards an easy philosophy of opposition*. You know: ‘I’m unhappy, it’s just gone wrong, where’s the problem, who is it, oh it must be Thatcher, oh it must be this, it must be that’ you know?” (2013:3)

“We should stop talking about ourselves as ‘the resistance’. You’re already *giving a position of inequality in which the other part is much stronger* and is sort of oppressing you, and you’re just sort of trying to resist *that*, rather than trying to create a situation where you are equals.” (2013:10)

“I think this is the thing, *not allowing yourself to become a victim*. If we’re talking about resistance, it’s never seeing yourself as a victim, that is when you’re being controlled. *If you think you’re resisting against a higher power, then they’ve already controlled you*. So that’s why I’m not so keen on this ‘resistance’ ... it’s like, connect with your *own power*.” (2013:13)

“The other side of the paranoia is it kind of *romanticises protest*, it kind of romanticises the organisation somehow, because *you feel like you’re operating outside of the status quo* somehow. And: ‘oo, look at me, I’m going to do something illegal here, and I’m doing it in secret and in solidarity with a small clique behind me...’ There’s a lot of social capital can be born from that.” (2014:8)

These quotes reflect the main critique which I aim to bring to the Occupy movement in London, by pointing towards the potential problem of adopting an ‘easy philosophy of opposition’ or adopting a position of inequality and marginality from the outset, becoming ‘victims’ against some supposed higher power as well as romanticising protest as being something which can happen in a space ‘outside’ of

wider social structures. What's more, the moralism and idealism of being a marginalised, excluded and oppressed group did *not* permit necessary reflexivity, instead slipping into a melancholia which fetishized the *very 'non-sensible' place that they had been designated.*

For Benjamin, such hopeless romanticism is worthy of the name 'melancholia' because it suggests a 'hanging on to' positions of marginality and oppression, rather than overcoming these positions through a positive collective assertion of their own power. As he writes, the problem with melancholia is that it "betrays the world for the sake of knowledge... in its tenacious self-absorption, it embraces dead objects in its consumption in order to redeem them" (Benjamin 1998:157), leading to the failure and loss of previous movements not being constructively reflected upon, but instead retained as part of a romanticism and fetishisation of that loss. In other words, melancholic activists always see themselves as moralistic and 'right' because they are *losing*, playing into a complicity with notions of authenticity, whilst foreclosing any notion of what 'winning' might look like. Whether looking backwards with rose-tinted spectacles or romanticising loss in the present, the melancholic activist therefore sticks to failure and adversity as evidence of resistive authenticity and legitimacy. As such, they are "finally, attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even to the failure of that ideal – than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present" (Brown 1999:191). Rather than capitalising on any possibilities for radical change following the financial crisis (which, I have suggested, were embodied in the tactics of occupation and the identity of 'we are the 99%'); the ideals of individualism, libertarianism, fetishized

openness and outside-ness (i.e. structurelessness), authenticity and cynicism foreclosed Occupy (in) London from the possibility of doing so.

Unable to mourn past failures, the melancholic is unable to come to terms with them or learn from them (as a constructive reflection) and instead it forms part of their identity. When faced with *new* movements, therefore, an overwhelming reaction of seasoned activists and analysts alike (including sociologists) is one of cynicism and dismissal, suggesting the “paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object” (Žižek 2008c:146). This fetishism of defeat, therefore, indicates “a certain narcissism with regard to one’s past political attachments and identity that frames all contemporary investments in political mobilisation, alliance, or transformation” (Brown 2001:169), making melancholia even more problematic because it is a “mournful, conservative, backward-looking attachment to feelings, analyses, or relations that have become fetishized and frozen in the heart of the critic” (Brown 2001:170). In other words, this is an approach to resistance which is *more attached to the structures that distribute it as non-sense* than to any possibilities of radical social change in the present.

By definition, melancholic resistance cannot bring about its desire for social change, because it is attached to the failure of change as a moralistic virtue. As Brown points out, this sustains a “stubborn clinging to a certain equation of truth with powerlessness, or as acting out of an *injured will*” (2001:23 *emphasis added*) or what she calls a ‘siege mentality’ which is “susceptible to growing rigidly defensive and brittle out of a sense of their imperilled existence... [which] tends to preclude their addressing deep sources of injustice” and therefore “suffering lives as [an]

identity rather than as a general injustice or domination” (2001:39). The pursuit of authenticity in marginality, in other words, is a “process through which a sense of resentment prompts actions that [are] codified as just, and in which *righteousness and inferiority act to ramify each other*” (Littler 2009:9 *emphasis added*).

My first conclusion, therefore, is that contemporary movements must *accept* and *critically reflect* upon their complicity with prevailing distributions of the sensible, rather than fetishise themselves as ‘outside’ of wider social structures. While the occupation of space and the establishment of universal collectivity suggest a certain radicality, they cannot realise their political potential when framed in terms of prefiguration and structurelessness, because this overlooks the common presuppositions of their resistance with dominant distributions and structures of power. In other words, what is necessary is “a politics of projects and strategies rather than moral righteousness; a politics of bids for power rather than remonstrances of it” (Brown 2001:106). This suggests a politics in which ideas of authenticity and purity are abandoned, feeding as they do into a melancholic marginality, siege mentality, resentment and the cunning of impotence by activists. In contrast, once one accepts complicity with such prevailing distributions of power, the question becomes instead how to prevent the *foreclosure* of possibility by that complicity, something which (as I argued above) can only be achieved through a re-figuring or *détournement* of the context, reflexively creating a collective identity and universal assertion in order to make non-sense appear (against its designation as such).

## The art of the impossible

Pointing to the US civil rights movement and Ghandi's resistance against British colonialism in India, Brown argues that "while these movements did not wholly eschew the phenomenon of identity produced through oppression, neither did they build solidarity on the basis of that production; rather, solidarity was rooted in *shared beliefs*... they eschewed cultivation of identity-bound difference claims" (2001:26). Put differently, despite being designated as 'non-sense' and 'impossible' by a (racist and colonial) distribution of the sensible, these movements did not fetishise and adopt this marginal position and instead created a collective ('we') on the basis of a shared identity and belief ('universal'), which avoided individualism, libertarianism and fetishized openness. What's more, despite adopting the position designated to them as 'impossible', they were able to turn (*détourne*) this into a positive solidarity on the basis of those shared beliefs, rather than fetishizing their resistance as 'outside' of such structures.

Indeed, Žižek offers us a similar argument when he points towards the well-known May '68 slogan: 'let us be realistic and demand the impossible'. Reading a radical potential in this slogan, he interprets it as "a call to be equal to the rest of the catastrophe that had befallen us by demanding what, in the framework of our symbolic belief, might appear to be 'impossible'" (Žižek 1992:28). In other words, because the designation of radical change as 'impossible' is an operation of power, Žižek argues that, rather than try and meet with that designation either by compromising and making futile demands *or* through a marginalised authenticity of refusal; resistance must *embrace the impossible and make it appear despite its*

*designation as such*. For instance, that social change is positioned as impossible in the post-crash context where it is reasserted that there is ‘no alternative’, means that activists must counter-intuitively *assert the ‘impossibility’ that radical change is possible*. This requires, however, recognition that “it is clearly possible to speak with authority without being authorised to speak” (Butler 1997:157), because this avoids the reduction and foreclosure of protest within the ‘possible’ – the ‘pragmatic’; ‘realistic’; ‘rational’ and ‘sensible’ – as conservative acceptances of the current framework (see Rigby & Schlembach 2013). Instead, Žižek’s art of the impossible (and Rancière’s politics) is “that which seeks to transform the very parameters of what is considered ‘possible’ in the existing constellation” (2008d:199) and therefore offers a much more radical politics that disrupts and refigures the distribution of the sensible.

The Occupy movement began as a resistance to the financial crisis and subsequent measures which reasserted neoliberal capitalism – a system of democratic deficit, deepening inequality and injustice – as common sense. Yet the presuppositions of many of those involved in the movement paradoxically entailed an ideological foreclosure by those very norms and distributions which they were attempting to challenge. It is my contention therefore, that in order for Occupy (in) London to be retroactively redeemed, future movements need to recognise such a critique and build upon what these activists set out to be achieve. By recognising that power operates through a historically contingent distribution of the sensible, we can also recognise the radical possibility of occupying space. By reflexively and carefully embracing collectivity and universalism, perhaps *including* (but by no means exclusively) parliamentary forms, we can find new routes for possibility rather than

pre-limiting options. By abandoning individualism, authenticity and cynicism – and embracing the ‘impossible’ – there can be instead a more genealogical politics which reflexively opens up the possibility for a radical social change.



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