

# OCCUPY PHILLY

**machete**



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# Capitalism and the State

## *Machete Confrontation at Occupy Philadelphia*

**Machete Group members Avi Alpert and Gabriel Rockhill in dialogue with Nancy Fraser and Annika Thiem**

*This text is the transcription of the opening comments during the Machete Group's second collective symposium at Occupy Philadelphia on October 21st, 2011. The ensuing discussion and closing comments have not been transcribed due to space limitations. For more information on this and related events: <https://machetegroup.wordpress.com/>*

**Avi Alpert:** The concept of confrontation that we are working with is the idea of facing with or facing together, which comes from the Latin roots of the word. The idea is that we are collectively here together confronting a system outside of us, but also we are confronting issues within ourselves. To help us do this we are looking at a history of texts and ideas that we will try and draw some contemporary themes out of. Last week we started by looking at themes in resistance and revolution, looking at works by Henry David Thoreau and Cornelius Castoriadis. We are going to focus this week on capitalism and the state, looking at some texts provided by Karl Marx, David Harvey, and Karl Polanyi. The hope today is that the format will be public pedagogy in an experimental sense. We will start with the microphone, so that everyone can hear. We want people to jump in whenever they feel they need to, or whenever a point comes up. We'll try to get some themes, issues on the table. We have here with us today from the New School, Nancy Fraser; from Villanova University, a member of Machete group, Gabriel Rockhill; and also from Villanova University, Annika Thiem. We will sort of set this in motion, with some reflections on the concepts of capitalism and the state. And then we'll open it up, but also it can be opened up by interventions as we progress. If people are needing to speak and you don't have the microphone, we have a megaphone that you can use. I'll bring it around to you. Otherwise, Gabriel is going to start.

**Gabriel Rockhill:** Thank you all for coming. I would like to share with you a few ideas in order to set the stage for our discussion. I will begin by adumbrating the neoliberal consensus, which has dominated a significant portion of social and political discourse over the last 30 or 40 years. This consensus is rather complex, but one feature of it that is central to our concerns here is the assumption that 'free market' capitalism is somehow in opposition to the state, and that what is meant by the 'free market' is an economy that dictates its own laws and follows its own course independently of exogenous mechanisms and institutions. Moreover, it is assumed that the free market analogically relates to freedom in a broader sense, as if the opening up of markets—or, at least, the presumed opening up of markets, since the 'free market' is very far from being free—would somehow facilitate human emancipation and freedom in a more general sense.

The second feature of the neoliberal credo is the naturalization of the economy, meaning that the economy is treated as a natural

phenomenon that is supposedly autonomous and 'self-regulating.' It is widely assumed, moreover, that the economy is such a complex natural force that one must be a member of the neoliberal punditocracy—meaning trained by business schools specializing in the neoliberal economic consensus—in order to understand the nearly incomprehensible intricacies of its fundamental laws.

In summary, the neoliberal credo teaches us that the free market is—or at least should be—a natural force that is free from external constraints and stands in opposition to the state. On this account, which is now an ideological staple of the contemporary American political imaginary, capitalism is opposed to socialism in the sense that the 'free' market supposedly rejects state intervention in the economy (the most recent state orchestrated bailouts should give pause to wonder about this simplistic equation).

To prepare for the discussion, I would like to draw on the work of Karl Polanyi, David Harvey and others in order to outline a historical critique of the neoliberal credo. Such a critique reveals the ways in which the establishment and maintenance of free market capitalism has been dependent from the very beginning on state intervention. Instead of the state being opposed to the free market, it is in fact the guarantor for the imposition of the free market itself. This is the case, as Polanyi has argued in great detail in *The Great Transformation*, because there is a spontaneous rejection by the general population of the orientation of the free market, since capitalism commodifies human beings and the natural world. Polanyi thereby underscores a dual paradox of history that shatters the mythological assumptions of the neoliberal credo: the free market economy has actually been the result of deliberate state intervention, and the subsequent restrictions on the free market arose spontaneously. In short, the free market was planned by state intervention, and it continues to be guaranteed by state interventions in the economy (as the most recent bailouts clearly illustrate). However, social planning itself was not planned but was rather the result of the spontaneous rejection of the commodification of human life and the environment. It might therefore be worth considering to what extent the current occupation movement is precisely a spontaneous rejection of just such a planned and organized commodification.

I would like to conclude by underscoring the deleterious consequences of the neoliberal consensus. The first is that it promotes and supports passive reactivity. If the market forces are indeed something like natural powers that follow their own complex laws that the layperson cannot understand, all that we can do is passively watch the unfolding of these economic forces, and call upon the punditocracy to explain them to us. The second major consequence is an absolute removal of responsibility and accountability from the agents of neoliberal economics. If the forces of the market are naturalized, no one can be held accountable for them, no one can be recognized as a responsible agent. Instead, the economy is held to be autonomous from social

and political forces, as well as from all of the decisions—such as the repeal of provisions of the Glass-Steagall Act—that allow the market to function in particular ways. The third and final consequence that I want to highlight is the historical shortsightedness and the myopic presentism that saturates the neoliberal credo. Instead of "looking backward," as Barack Obama is fond of saying, and tracking the deep sources of current problems, we are told that we should simply "look forward," as if turning a blind eye to the past were somehow a constructive act. The message is clear: we should not be concerned with past decisions and the consequences they have had on the present conjuncture, nor should we worry about accountability since this would somehow be divisive. This myopic orientation functions in close conjunction with the ubiquity of 'crisis discourse.' Not only are we told to not look backward, but we are bombarded by frenetic crisis talk that forces us into a position of fear in relationship to a critical situation that is supposedly too complex for us to understand and too urgent to be subject to public debate. Once again, the message is unambiguous: we should remain passive and fearful spectators who watch crises unfold like 'natural' phenomena that come from nowhere.

**Nancy Fraser:** Thank you, Gabriel. That was a very good start to this discussion. I strongly agree with what I took to be the two main points that you articulated. First of all, there is the fact that the free market is not natural but is a political project that has to be imposed using political power, including the coercive power of the state, because people left to themselves would resist it. Secondly, you made the point that it is not helpful to understand the economy as a natural system with its own laws of motion precisely because it is a highly politicized mechanism and one that is wide open not only for the intervention of existing states but also by us, and by the forces that we might mobilize to change things.

To develop this argument, I want to say first of all that it is terrific that people in this country are finally beginning to mobilize: we have put up with too much for too long. Secondly, it is not going to be adequate in the long term for us to understand the problem simply in terms of the greed of Wall Street bankers, hedge fund managers and so on. We need to have a deeper and more thorough understanding of the processes that have led to the massive ripoffs and the major crisis that we are now suffering from. And I think that the authors that were mentioned here--Marx, Polanyi, Harvey--are great places to start in order to try to understand this. With this in mind, let me offer a way of synthesizing some of the ideas of these three people that I think might be useful for us.

First of all, I think that the crisis that we are living through is very severe and very complex, and I want to single out three main flash points or centers of this crisis. There is, first of all, the financialization crisis, which is getting a great deal of attention, which has to do with the way in which an entire shadow

economy of paper values has been created seemingly out of thin air. And yet, somehow this shadow economy of purely paper values is able to devastate the real economy, to put people out of work, to destroy the livelihoods of literally billions of people throughout the world, in this country and elsewhere. As if that were not bad enough by itself, this crisis is intersecting with a second flash point: the ecological crisis. The same forces that brought us the financialization crisis are also destroying the basis of life on the planet. They are privatizing water and air and all kinds of aspects of the natural environment and literally destroying the biosphere, destroying the habitats and the human places that people all over the world live in. It is disrupting our entire symbiotic relationship with nature, of which, after all, we are a part. As if that were not bad enough, we also have a third major flash point of crisis, which is intertwined with these other two, and here I want to draw on some feminist ideas. This third crisis has to do with social reproduction: the depletion of all the human capacities that are so important for creating and sustaining social bonds, forms of solidarity, and human connection, whether we understand these in terms of the forms of caregiving like the one within families or neighborhoods and communities, or the sphere of education, health care and all the ways that people maintain connections. No society, no decent society of any kind, is possible unless we have an adequate capacity to reproduce social bonds. No society is possible without the sustainability and capacity of nature to reproduce itself. And no society is possible without control over the financial instruments that are, after all, like the credit system, supposed to actually serve human life, and not to be the vehicles that are ripping us off.

So my point is that we have three strains of crisis, each of which is scary enough by itself. Put them together, and you have a constellation that is truly alarming. Returning to Gabriel's point, I think that neoliberalism is at the root of each of these three crises. In each case--and here we can reference once again the work of Karl Polanyi--we are commodifying something that really doesn't lend itself to being commodified without destroying the ongoing basis of our society. We are commodifying nature. Think about carbon emission trading, think about the engineering of sterile seeds, which has become a habit in agriculture throughout the world. Think of the planting of genes and so on. There is a kind of invasive, intensive commodification of nature, which is literally destroying the biosphere. Finally, there is social reproduction. Think about the commodification of education, of health care, of childcare, care of the old, the industrialization of care often through the importation of migrant care workers, commonly women who are forced to leave their own care responsibilities in the hands of someone else. And so we get what feminists are calling the elaboration of global care chains, in which you plug a hole in care-work in one place only by creating a deficit somewhere else. Here, too, we are commodifying forms of activity that really cannot be commodified without creating deficit strains and crisis.

These are three forms of intensified commodification that are central to neoliberalism and are bringing about three

severe flash points that are intertwined with one another in ways that I won't try to spell out here. The central question for us, I think, is: what constitutes a serious political response on the part of all of us here and elsewhere who are finally fed up with the commodification of the planet and human life?

**Annika Thiem:** Thank you very much. I'll try to be brief so we can get to discussion. I would like to pick up on some points that Nancy and Gabriel have already raised for us. Part of what marks the Occupy movement in the U.S. is that it is local, but also in contact with the global movement to say "no" to the neoliberalization of our economies, the commodification of people and the environment. This movement takes up not only forms of resistance from the Arab Spring and the European Summer, but also echoes the Greek protests that started in 2008 with the slogan "No to Everything." This slogan marks resoundingly that this crisis cannot be resolved by a few demands that could be accommodated within the existing system. To build such resistance, we also need a thorough analysis of these existing structures. In light of that need, I would like to make four points about how we might understand the collusion of our political structures and institutions with the capitalist economy. Gabriel talked about the illusion of the free market that exists without state intervention. I would like to raise the other side of state interventions, namely, the state's breaking up and discouraging most forms of social solidarity.

First, in this country we have witnessed, especially since the 1980s under Reagan, the fragmentation and evisceration of labor unions. They continue to be forced to become more and more narrow in their scope and claims, as collective bargaining rights have been severely limited by the legal changes over the last three decades. At this point they have been forced into becoming interest groups advocating importantly on behalf of their members, but on a broader political scale unions have become less and less effective. Further, while unions have seen their political force curbed, their counterparts--lobbies and corporate donors--have gained political importance in both of the major political parties. The importance of lobbies and large scale donors has grown to a point that the political system in this country basically already prima facie crowds out any other oppositional parties. Consequently, democratic representation at this point means, for us the people, being limited to casting our vote now and then, while at the same time, laws are drafted and negotiated more and more behind closed doors and determined by lobbying groups. So what we call democracy has become a lobbyocracy and we must ask how to claim power and build something that might truly be called democracy, the people's rule.

Second, Nancy has already brought up a second form of how the state colludes in hindering forms of social solidarity. It does so by privatizing social services and education, which means that social support and education become goods for individuals and pit individuals against each other in trying to access them. Moreover, as the most recent numbers show, the average university student is \$28,000 in debt, which means that at the point of entering the labor force, most of us today are deeply beholden to the credit institutions. And not only are we beholden to a consumer debt

economy, but we are initiated into it materially and ideologically before we enter the workforce and without much, if any, chance to ever get out of debt. As education and social services become ever more thoroughly privatized, the state (and we, absent a powerful collective political will to change this situation) collude in this intensification of individual debt.

Third, the state continuously intervenes on behalf of capitalism and against critical social solidarity by managing the dissent of the disenfranchised by means of the police force as well as criminal law. We have witnessed the progressive criminalization of poverty and an increase of incarceration, as sentencing laws have become more and more severe. At the same time, it is important to mention--and requires more analytical and practical attention--that poverty and incarceration are racialized issues in our society. Moreover, when we consider the passing of laws in favor of privatizing state prisons, while the very same politicians serve on the executive boards of those prisons' management companies or receive large campaign donations from these companies, it is increasingly difficult to deny that we are dealing with an industrial-carceral complex. The working poor and disenfranchised tend to live with the constant threat of coming into conflict with law enforcement and tend to be perceived as perpetually non-productive, non-contributing, and in effect dispensable (non-)members of society.

Fourth and finally, in conjunction with the previous point, police and other law enforcement agencies intervene constantly to discourage us from organizing publicly. We are facing uncertainties in permitting processes that limit the right to assembly, curfew laws that are differentially enforced, and general intimidation practices, such as law enforcement violence that gets emphasized by the media in ways that discourage us from forming public alliances. Moreover, we are being made generally afraid in our work places that involvement in political organizing might make us lose our jobs. We are also being shaped into habits of consumerism that make us feel like protesting in person is too much trouble and unlikely to be effective.

To close, I would like to mention that we are witnessing widespread discontent and responses to neoliberal capitalism around the globe. Some of these responses here in the U.S. have been in the name of a return to the lost glory of the times of the Founding Fathers, mobilizing nationalist reactionary fantasies. Other responses advocate restricting ourselves to small, extremely local communities, returning to nature and refusing technological advances alongside trying to link the local with large-scale international communal organizing. Acknowledging the shared discontent, Occupy Together nonetheless refuses both these forms of reactionary and exclusively localist resistance. As part of Occupy Together, we ask how we can claim practices of resistance and emancipation to oppose the false kind of the individual liberty to consume that the "free market" promises us and condemns us to. Occupy refuses to stand by any longer to see our political system and state institutions work for neoliberal capitalism and against the majority of the people. We ask and seek to claim our political institutions and reshape them so that finally there may be power wielded by the people for the people. Thank you.

# You Can't Go Home Again, and Other Messages from the Ideology Machine

As they build a city within a city and attempt to respond to the personal, intellectual, physical, and spiritual needs of their neighbors, the occupiers are challenging the logic of the capitalist city. The word "city," with its contemporary connotations, mystifies more than it reveals about the average North American city during the current stage of late capitalism. If we were to describe Philadelphia, for instance, as a city, we might picture it as a community of people with overlapping interests, for whom various industries provide jobs, such that they can pursue these interests. In this picture, the industries would be in service of the residents' other pursuits, including perhaps their families, theater groups, sports teams, and schools. However, to think of a city as a sort of cultural nexus in which industry serves the people by providing reliable jobs is a romantic, even ideological notion. To hold Philadelphia to that standard is to assume that such a city exists or could possibly exist in the given economic configuration. This is not to say that there might not be liberatory potential in this ideal city, nor is it to say that we couldn't find livable and even vibrant neighborhoods that might serve as models for imagining future, human cities. But if we want to locate this liberatory potential, it must be within a greater discussion of what currently prevents its full realization.

The occupiers are staging their own conversation about the city through their encampment. The stark disconnect between their attempt at non-hierarchical, participatory existence and the lonely city that surrounds them puts into relief the city's function in capitalism as a site for the concentration of wealth, the concentration of disposable labor, and the concentration of consumer goods, and not as a place for the great democratic experiment.

Capitalism functions so well in large part because of its adaptability. Therefore, I do not suggest that what I

am calling the pervasive myths of late capitalism are in any way necessary to capital's functioning; rather, they are the myths most suited to capital in its current epoch of accumulation. In addition to its discursive critiques of the given state of affairs, the occupation, through its very material presence, calls into question the capitalist myths regarding the city, including the myth that you can't go home again, or really ever, and that the world is your oyster and the city the preferred oyster bar.

## Myth Number 1: You Can't Go Home Again

We are admonished to come to terms with the harsh reality that we can't go home again. This is part of growing up and accepting the reality principle. This is the tragic condition of the human experience, or some such platitude, the



fall from our original fullness.

We may not even want to go home again, because perhaps home never felt quite homely in the first place. It probably wasn't. Still, we may want to find some place that is.

But we are reminded that such desires are parochial, naïve, nostalgic. Even the so-called critics of capital don't want us to go home again. The dreams of a lost fullness, the profound feeling of the loss of something we never had, is considered reactionary. There is no backwards movement. History moves forward, and so do we.

If we can't go home, where are we to go? Especially in its current epoch, capitalism wants us unmoored. It desires disoriented consumers, with no sense

of identity or place (because in fact they have no real identity or place), who will accordingly purchase their identities in the form of commodities. It also requires a free, mobile, and expendable labor force, willing and in fact forced to go anywhere for work. We can't go home, but we can go shopping, and of course we will move for work.

## Myth Number 2: Bright Lights, Big City

Or perhaps you've been told a different story. Perhaps you have been told that it is inherently good to accumulate "experiences": travel to foreign countries, live in a big city, live in the country, play a sport. The city is the locus of possibility and the backdrop to the movie of your life. Why would you need a home, anyway? The world is your oyster.

I find something suspicious in the admonition to "expand your horizons." The horizon is already expansive and breathtaking. You don't need to expand it, and, anyway, I don't think you could. We can't see it, though, from our current vantage point. The city skyline obstructs our view, and we are dazzled by the bright lights.

Dizzy, we join in the frenetic rush to add badges to our sashes.

The occupation is challenging these myths in myriad ways. In Philadelphia, people are joining together to reclaim a place that was never really theirs, but they have a memory of a loss and a desire for a home. In a setting that is unhomely by virtue of its exposure to precipitation, cold, and hostility from its critics, the occupiers are making a precarious home, one that shows us quite vividly how precarious our homes have always been.

-SV

# Beneath the Beach, the Sidewalk?



What does it mean, that some of the occupants of Philadelphia are now occupying Philadelphia? That the citizens, inhabitants, or occupants of a great city feel the need to occupy that city, more or less in the military sense, which implies that they are taking over and attempting to hold hostile ground? Between these two senses of the word 'occupy'—on the one hand to seize and hold, and to defend a place against all comers; on the other hand, to live in, to inhabit, to be at home in a place—I am imagining a gap, an empty space, even a desert or a place of homelessness and destitution, which the occupiers are attempting to traverse, and which demands to be accounted for.

The first occupation was named, not after a city, but after a particular street—"Occupy Wall Street." 'Wall Street' names a social position as much as a physical place; the movement styled itself as the 99% of the population who only control a minority of the country's wealth speaking out against the 1% who control the majority of it. Those who occupy positions of wealth and power were put on notice that the rest of us, those who occupy less exalted social positions, were not going to remain passively silent and watch them lay waste to our home.

Of course, this was always a hyperbolic and, frankly, even a manipulative slogan. Even if we disregard the fact that the 99% is here represented by perhaps .001% (assuming 30,000 demonstrators nationwide), the numbers obscure more than they illuminate. It's not that I deny that a small percentage of the population is in possession of a large portion of its wealth, or that this is a problem, or even that these people are in many cases nefarious, or at least greedy, selfish and

irresponsible. But the real problem is that the production of wealth is so structured that there is a place at the top for these people to occupy; in other words, the problem is not that some people are willing to prosper at the expense of others, but that behavior consistent with this goal is systematically rewarded.

In order to address this problem we need to consider economics, a word that has its roots in the Greek words *oikos*, home, and *nomos*, law or regulation. The economic question is in a real sense the question of the home, of the space we occupy and how it is regulated. In this case, our home is regulated in such a way that it is not a home for us, its occupants, and so we find ourselves forced to seize and occupy it. But we should consider the limits and deficiencies of a military approach that identifies an enemy—a cabal of financiers—and a territory to be captured—a small piece of Philadelphia, or New York, or any other American city—and ask what such an approach conceals or prevents us from addressing.

In taking over what is ostensibly public space, the occupiers have demonstrated that this is not space that they otherwise occupy; we are homeless right here in our home. The economics of value production—which is the occupation of all of us, in one way or another—is incompatible with the production of genuine wealth, and leaves no room for a collective good life. This is most viscerally evident in the case of those of us who are literally homeless, as is the case with many of the occupiers here in Philly. But it is just as much the case that, while some of us may be more materially comfortable to one degree or another (which is not a small thing), we are all homeless to the

extent that we occupy abstract space in a modern city, which is itself little more than a giant machine for the production of homelessness. Amid the affluent and the effluent, the flow of value and the counter-flow of its waste products, our lives are ordered and arranged without regard for meaningful relations or any kind of non-poisonous connection with the natural world.

The occupation at City Hall is occurring in what is called a 'public' space, space that purportedly belongs to all of us but really belongs to none of us. The truth is that there is no space here in Philly that is not occupied by capital, and we are its unfortunate guests, maybe even its prisoners. Capital is a word for the relation between things, the space or desert between them, which doesn't appear as such in any one of them but which orders and arranges all of them, whether we notice this or not. This is not a space that we can occupy; rather, it occupies us.

Even when we feel most at home, as we perhaps feel when we are among sympathetic people down at City Hall, capital occupies us, ordering and arranging the space that we occupy, determining our fortunes in provisioning and maintaining the occupation, sitting in as a silent partner in our negotiations with the authorities, conditioning our experience of time, stamping our decisions and our hesitations with its invisible logo. The strength and weakness of Occupy Philadelphia is in its festivity—like all festivals, a space has been opened in which we feel ourselves returned to our roots in the earth, and in each other. And like all festivals, there is a temporary suspension of everyday norms and rules; but such a cessation is always followed by a resumption, of one kind or another. Occupy Philadelphia will occupy Philadelphia for a time, and then it will be gone. The famous graffiti from May, 1968, proclaimed "Beneath the sidewalk, the beach!" When this wave crests and recedes, what will remain—the beach or the sidewalk? Or, even better, a place that we can call our home?

Occupy Philadelphia confronts us with our homelessness, and with the economic roots of our homelessness. The form of this movement thus gives us an opportunity to raise the most fundamental social questions, even if it is not adequate, in itself, to answer them. But that is already a lot. If we don't shrink from these questions, then what becomes evident is that Occupy Philadelphia will not have succeeded until we really do occupy Philadelphia, in the sense that we inhabit it, make it our home.

--CR

# Autumn practices; Vacate X; But if these are the means, then to what purpose?

I would advise stilts for the quagmires/  
And camels for the snowy hills  
-Incredible String Band, Creation

First we have to address, and thereby put aside, the controversy surrounding this division of the 99% and the 1%. It is probably best to try and understand it as a camouflagic ruse, like eyespots and other automimicry. Perhaps it serves to startle approaching antagonists.

When 30 people in their tents proclaim that they are 99% of the population, it no doubt dazzles those who would seek to dismiss the protest's relevance in terms of representationality and proportion.

Even so, objectively, there is no categorical correlation between the 1% (who are said to 'own' 45% of wealth), the 99% (who are defined negatively in terms of their being not the 1%), and the specific practices of 'Occupy X'.

The implied (quantitatively staged) hostility between these two populated percentages is equivalent to an equally staged qualitative opposition between say, a table fork and some almond blossom – with Occupy X crystallising revolutionary consciousness in the form of a starfish.

Any politics of blame, in which the production of the world by the 99% is discounted and the world's flaws attributed to the hidden agenda of an identifiable minority, always reinstigates a reactionary ideology structured on preformed archaic hostilities to 'X' allocated others.

Blame as a method of social critique cannot but mistake the nature of capitalism, and perceive it as being something 'outside' of us. But if the 'them' of this politics is constituted in error, then so much the more erroneously is its 'we' presented. In contradistinction to Occupy X's representation of the situation, materially, we are the them of capitalism.

Capitalism is us, 'we' produce it. Therefore, capitalism's abolition

requires our transformation, and not theirs. We, that is the proletarianised population of the world are reproducing both the 1% and the 99%. They are an outcome, a symptom, as we are, of this structured relation.

When approaching the question of social transformation, the anti-political communist's theoretical gambit supposes that if the 99% are structured otherwise, then the 1% (the residual 1% of our capitalised selves) in Marx's terms, will wither away.

The communist revolution is predicated upon the abolition of the entire 100% of the capitalised population, not simply the 1% of extra rich property owners.

And the objective revolutionary purpose of the maimed majority, that quantity of population which has been subjected to the process of proletarianisation, is its own disappearance.

Emphatically, communism is not to be identified with the institutionalisation of a moral majoritarian superiority over greedy parasites and exploiters.

If this false opposition between the ninety nine and the one has now been put to sleep, it is necessary to turn to the political form of Occupy X. The question is, is this the path of social liberation? Is Occupy X the social form that humanity will compose in pursuit of its true self?

Only narcissists would think so. There is nothing intrinsic to objectively distinguish Occupy X from any other form of capitalised politics. As with all other subjectively accessible forms, it

presupposes a representational model through which, by self-assertion, the activities of a tiny minority are made to reflect and articulate a much greater, uninvolved and silent social body.

What an unremarked upon coincidence it is that Occupy X has discovered within its own miniscularity of practice an identity with the entirety of human sociality. Or not a coincidence at all, as this staged discovery by means of representational *tromp l'oeil* is the trick of all jacobin-leninism (the revolutionary form, and outer limit, of bourgeois political consciousness).

The problem inherent to capitalism's opposition does not lie in identifying an enemy them but in reformulating an us which does not simply conform to ideological conventions.

Social revolution supposes the transformation of the entirety of social relationships. And this depends upon the abolition of the formal structuring of the mode of production, i.e. the structure which produces practices of expropriation and territorial occupation.

To restate this in reverse: where expropriation is reproduced practically in 'revolutionary' politics, the formal mode of production is thereby reproduced.

If communism is a politics of departure from the dominant commodity form, then it must leave behind the implied territorial politics of 'occupation'.

Instead of Occupy X, a specifically communist formation would take shape as Vacate X (where X = everywhere) in which therapeutic paths leading away from proletarian subjectivity are consciously sought out or laid down.

Red and yellow leaves danced around his head and from far away in the hills came another autumn downpour to wash away the last of everything he didn't want to remember.



# On Angela Davis's Visit to Occupy Philly: Call for Diversity within Philly and Solidarity with Oakland

On the 28th of October, 2011, Angela Davis marched to the occupied Dilworth Plaza with an enormous group of people that came from her talk at the University of Pennsylvania, and addressed Philly's occupiers. She appealed to two main issues: the heterogeneity under our unity as the 99%, and our solidarity with other occupations, most urgently with Oakland.[1] These were indeed acknowledged and celebrated facts by the occupiers from the beginning, but there is always the risk of losing sight of what is taken for granted. We, the occupiers, are coming out of the very society of which we demand change. We are not completely devoid of its systemic hierarchies and segregation, even though we stand up to prevent their recreation. Davis' first reminder can be another call for us to realize our ethnic, racial, sexual and political diversity and find ways of co-habitation among ourselves so that we may be exemplary for the rest of society. On the other hand, Davis' second appeal for solidarity is crucial, even though it seems to state the obvious fact: We are Occupy Philly, part of the occupation movement, and hence nation-wide, in fact global! Yes, but at the same time, we haven't really been successful in expressing our solidarity with our sister occupations against the police threats and raids they have been faced with.[2] I think the major reason behind this lies in a special kind of violence we are subjected to--a violence that has not raided our plaza yet, but has been ordering us to comply with a friendly face, while at the same time constantly threatening us with evacuation. This slows us down from stepping out from Dilworth plaza and resolving to take a stand beside our sister occupations in the national and global movement.

Angela Davis called on us to participate in the general strike on the 2nd of November in solidarity with Oakland. The unanimous applause and will to strike were a remarkable moment in the occupation. It had the potential to break out of the state of consternation which violence at abeyance aims to put us into. Then, when the time came to really express our solidarity, we could only organize a 99 minute symbolic strike. It was better than nothing, but OP missed the chance of expressing solidarity with full force, which would not only empower Occupy Oakland but also strengthen OP's hand against the mayor's evacuation plan on the 15th of November. We did not take that opportunity. Now we have to hope that other occupations will display greater solidarity with OP on the 15th.

Occupy Philly, from its beginning on the 6th of October, has seemed to have remarkable advantages compared to several other occupations. It didn't need to face bare police brutality[3] and had no legal obstacle to build tents in a relatively large area. It applied to and acquired a permit to use that space from the city. This made room for focusing on its internal organization and activities as well as the building of structures. From the first day on, more than 20 committees emerged. To introduce some briefly here, the food committee has been making sure that there is free food and drinks three times a day. Medics have been keeping a 24-hour active medical tent. The library committee established a library with a wide range of books

to be freely borrowed. The Education/Training committees have been organizing numerous teach-ins, trainings, workshops, discussions, and reading groups, forming an alternative to mainstream educational institutions. Safety has been training people for handling conflicts non-violently and nullifies the need to call police in tension-ridden circumstances. Direct Action organized various marches to major banks, universities, and to the briefings of the representatives of the 1%. The Arts Committee organizes concerts and shows, and enriches the occupation with witty and beautiful signs.

This list neither gives an exhaustive account of the committees nor the various activities that have been happening in our occupation. It is meant to show that with the organizational capacities and efforts of the Philly occupiers almost a new city, with its more than 400 tents, was built. Further, it shows that we have a lot to lose now. I think it explains why OP's relations with the mayor took most of General Assembly's time, when we admit

that we are under constant threat. The violence in abeyance has prompted people to stay focused on that direction, which eventually led to the unfortunate formulation of the first "official" words from the occupation (the letter approved at the 25th Oct. evening GA) framed as a response to the letter from the city.

In one of the early discussions at the GA about the legal permit, after the legal committee told us that the mayor was willing to give us a permit, one young woman stood up and said, "This is how the city is trying to tame us, by letting us be and waiting for us to hang ourselves with our own rope." OP didn't hang itself and did a good job in using the permit to its limits. But at the same time, it spent most of its time securing its advantages, and preventing police violence from sweeping away all the things we built here. We have to make sure to continue our occupation, for sure. And if it requires us to negotiate with the city, we have to do that. But we shouldn't be distracted by the potential violence that has been imposed upon us. It is a different kind of violence than what we saw most recently in Oakland, but one that is far more potent and isolating: dictating to us that we have to behave, and keep our mouths shut against the police brutality which our fellow occupations are facing, because we don't want to be subjected to the same measures here.

Angela Davis' second point, about diversity, seems less urgent but definitely not less important. OP has been aware that it is a diverse community. The concomitant announcement that begins each GA eloquently acknowledges this feature: "We acknowledge that we are on

colonized land that belongs to the Lenape people. We are striving to make this space free from racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ageism, and other oppressive actions." However, reading this intro can't eliminate the systemic discrimination ingrained in society and carried over to the occupation. Days before the facilitation committee made a decision on reading this intro on 17th October, the people of color committee was formed to express their distress at continuing discrimination. OP is remarkably inclusive in its organization, but has not yet found a solution to completely evade the systemic oppressions of people of color and women. GAs are designed



to be progressive even in their stack takings, which means giving priority of speech to the discriminated. But this has proved inadequate to address the problem of including what has been systemically excluded in society. Angela Davis' visit and call may mark a point that challenges OP to find more productive solutions to problems of discrimination in its community. These might eventually be exemplary for society in general.

The question though still remains: how? Can GAs be of any help in finding solutions to deeply rooted problems in society? Is there a way to solve those problems without addressing the more systemic ones that happen within but also reach beyond our local occupation? Angela Davis, in her talk at UPenn, referred to the long march from the 60s that she said started to bear its fruits with the occupation movement. We as occupiers may also have a long way to go, but we ourselves are evidence that no determined march is ever left without a step towards a just society.

Çetin Gürer

[1] Davis appealed to solidarity with Palestine as well in her talk at UPenn, which she didn't mention in OP.

[2] Boston was raided on the 10th of October, Denver on the 13th, OWS was about to be evacuated on the 14th, Oakland was severely raided on the 25th and then Nashville and San Diego (28th) and Richmond (31st) followed, and Oakland, Portland, and Burlington are currently being raided.

[3] It applies only within the Dilworth Plaza, there were 24 arrests in total by now (November 9th) during the marches. And also, no one knows what will follow after 15th of November, when the legal permit comes to an end.

# Political Disobedience

Many casual and professional critics of The Occupy Movement have pointed to its nebulous nature and lack of coherent political demands as serious shortcomings and as proof of a certain general vacuousness punctuated only by clichéd hacky sack and drum circles. Rather than respond to such a position with specific demands, a unified platform and a clear goal, it may be the case that these perceived shortcomings are in fact positive attributes which may present a dangerous potential threat to the status quo. In a recent New York Times column on the subject of the Occupy Movement, Bernard E. Harcourt introduces what I see as a possibly fruitful distinction between civil disobedience and political disobedience. In

his own words, Harcourt summarizes the distinction as follows:

Civil disobedience accepted the legitimacy of political institutions, but resisted the moral authority of resulting laws. Political disobedience, by contrast, resists the very way in which we are governed: it resists the structure of partisan politics, the demand for policy reforms, the call for party identification, and the very ideologies that dominated the post-War period.

Thus civil disobedience is distinguished from political disobedience most markedly by putting the legitimacy of political institutions in question. A position of civil disobedience accepts the legitimacy of the political institutions and political

disobedience does not. What this means for the Occupy Movement is that not having specific demands, not aligning with a political party and not having a unified message are perhaps indicators of a larger unwillingness to engage in and accept the procedures of current political institutions.

If politics were a game like chess, for example, political disobedience would then not merely be the creation of new moves for one of the pieces, or a knocking over of the board – it would be the slow creation of new pieces (perhaps mixed with the old), with new rules on a new surface. It would be the creation of a new game.

-RT



## Concrete Idealism: Philadelphia's Agora

Dilworth Plaza has never been a place in which Philadelphians took pride. Sitting at the foot of the marble facade of City Hall, the drab concrete surfaces are an eyesore. The area occasionally hosts seasonal gatherings, including a Christmas market, yet is more often hosting napping homeless, the occasional pedestrian, and city government employees on a smoke break. Plans were finalized in July 2011 to redevelop the space, making it 'greener' and adding an ice skating rink in the hope of bringing the space to life. Occupy Philadelphia's decision to locate its protests in Dilworth Plaza could be the most original and effective use of the space in its lifetime, though the movement's timing with the impending renovation couldn't be worse.

The decision to occupy Dilworth, made on a Thursday night in the Arch Street United Methodist Church, was made for its proximity to the locus of political power in City Hall, maximum visibility to Philadelphia's center city district, and finally minimizing displacement of the homeless. Once occupied, the movement followed the Occupy Wall Street model, setting up a library, information booths, the daily general assembly and allowing political groups such as the Ron Paul campaign and the Green Party to put up information booths. The creation of new protest communities at Dilworth plaza and Zucotti park has been described by one protester as a "model" for a new social order. A fixed space to house an open, freewheeling social order is not a new idea, and harkens back to one of the roots of urban architecture, the Greek agora.

The most valuable analysis of the agora's place in the evolution of the city square can be found in Henri Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*. The city square begins its history with the Athenian agora, a space in which citizens of Athens met to freely discuss political issues, and ends with the domination of the same square by the market and capital: Christ's attack on the moneylenders on the steps of the temple, Lefebvre says, is representative of the unsuccessful attempts by the ancients to keep a valueless market of ideas intact in the face of commerce's slow creep into consciousness.

If Dilworth were built to facilitate a market of goods or, less likely, a marketplace of ideas, most Philadelphians would agree that it failed. A building like the Comcast Center, on the other hand, with its giant video screens, food court and executive office suites, is clearly where Lefebvre's market square lies. The building is a monstrous alchemy of finance and media. Comcast's qualification for tax-abatement for construction of the largest structure in Philadelphia speaks to its importance in this capacity. When around fifty of us tried to occupy the Comcast Center on November 2nd to bring attention to this fact, the police reaction was immediate, ending with ten arrests.

The occupation of the normally empty Dilworth plaza thus represents a throwback to an ancient social device, a commerceless space in which free exchange of ideas can occur without the limitations imposed by estimations of exchange value. More importantly, Dilworth disturbs the market's dominance

over civic life with its location: William Penn designed the city precisely so that the doorstep of City Hall is the center of Philadelphian life, making Dilworth a perfect location for remaking an "American agora" and loosening the stranglehold of symbols of market power such as the Comcast Center. Dilworth's libraries, the free exchange of political ideas, the sheltering of the homeless and, of course, the general assemblies, represent the revival of a civic life that has long languished. Soon, Occupy Philadelphia will be threatened by the plans to replace the concrete with a simulacrum of Rockefeller Plaza, ostensibly making it a more inviting place, despite the fact that these days there are more people in the plaza on any given day than in its entire history. This renovation will come at the expense of Dilworth's most valuable function to date: hosting a Philadelphia agora.

-Will Caverly

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