



Eviction and Occupation

The crisis of Occupy Philly's eviction has revealed its contradictory relationship to the political and economic processes in Philadelphia. But the crisis has also opened tentative possibilities for recognizing those processes for what they are, and for developing new kinds of occupation that break with the deadening ceremonies of the status quo.

Nutter, just before evicting OP, claimed that it had become "dangerous" and "intolerable," that it stood against the good of the community by blocking jobs at Dilworth Plaza, and that it was simply illegal. But Occupy Philly's confrontations with Nutter and City Hall over the last two weeks have revealed a contradiction at the heart of the occupation. A more transgressive tendency has led OP to take over spaces and transform them, even when this led to breaking with the political and legal system. The occupation reconfigured Dilworth Plaza, of course, but it was two weeks later, at the protest against Eric Cantor, that the movement occupied a private building for the first time (Huntsman Hall at UPenn), even if only briefly. This tendency developed quickly, and on October 24th several protestors were arrested in the street outside the police roundhouse, and several

more in the lobby of the Comcast Building a short time after that. The November 17th protests and arrests on the Market Street Bridge were followed the next day by more arrests in Wells Fargo.

But a tendency to respect private and public property and to work only within the political-legal system was always present. A need for legality structured the movement from its first mass meetings in early October, when seeking a permit from Nutter was a condition for beginning the protest. The issue of permits has become an overbearing one, dominating every discussion at the GA for weeks before OP's eviction. This tendency to obedience, not transgression, was clearest in the bitter arguments which broke out in the GA over arrests and civil disobedience.

The contradiction so far dominating OP is that it has been simultaneously transgressive and permitted. It has been a sanctioned use of a public space "granted" by City Hall (as Nutter has constantly reminded us), but also an attempt at taking over and temporarily transforming spaces in protest of the political and economic order. OP's crisis of eviction is an exacerbation of this same problem. The ambiguous legality of its camp at Dilworth has evaporated

completely. It has been confronted with the necessity of becoming either entirely innocuous and permitted, or of attempting a more transgressive (and more uncertain) path.

This contradiction is a result of the fact that OP is embedded in two kinds of ritualistic time: political and economic. The political system in this city and country is a kind of ceremony we're allowed to take part in every two to four years. The eviction of OP reveals that outside the circumscribed ceremony of voting, agitation for political or economic change is blasphemous and if it keeps up will be "dealt with." This is why, to Obama, we're simply a "frustrated" mass, and why Nutter in his eviction notice sneered at "what they [the occupiers] call democracy." Both are saying we can only have a voice if it's expressed within the existing, two-party political process, and so only if we give up our voice completely to the existing order through the ritual of voting. Our economic lives are ritualized as well. The working day returns endlessly and we're required to faithfully go through the motions: to work, then back home where we prepare for the next day, only to repeat the cycle. Our weekends and weeknights are those parts of the endless ritual

repetition which prepare us to do it all over again. Our consumption, too, is ceremonialized. With the arrival of the holiday season, annual rituals of buying like Black Friday, Cyber Monday, and the entire Christmas season arrive once more. The endless repetitions of making, selling and buying don't end after Christmas but structure our lives by keeping money and goods and people flowing smoothly towards the maximization of profit.

Of course, these two ritualized times are not really distinct. They work together both locally and nationally. Locally, the problem that OP poses to City Hall is that it threatens not only to disrupt the normal political ritual-time by acting outside the voting booth, but it also houses a possibility for rupturing normal economic functions (like the project at Dilworth Plaza). Nutter's politics is designed to put down whatever could rupture the normal flow of money and goods through this city, and nationally, the Citizens United ruling ensures that unlimited corporate money can flow into political campaigns. The deregulation of finance since the 1970's has made it so that profits are increasingly private and risks are increasingly public, i.e., corporate losses are eventually bailed out by the people. (David Harvey calls this "neoliberalism.") In other words, our current politics and economics are rituals that work together to hold the status quo in place. Through them we're supposed to faithfully perform the same actions again and again without question. Such ritual time paves over any real "present" in which new, transformative action could occur. Politics and the economy, we're told, are established, determined processes. The job of the people is simply to participate in the established ceremonies: voting, buying, working, selling.

OP necessarily began within these ritualistic processes. Procuring a permit, and so beginning within the limits of Philadelphia politics, allowed it room to grow

and establish itself. But its subsequent attempts at transgression have often remained almost ceremonial. The arrests beginning on October 24th were highly planned, pre-announced, and by definition temporary and limited appropriations of space. As a result, only slight modifications were needed by the city's political and legal machinery to plug these events into a "normal" flow. The process has gone like this: the police escort the protesters to their destination; then, the police cordon off those planning to be arrested; and after a

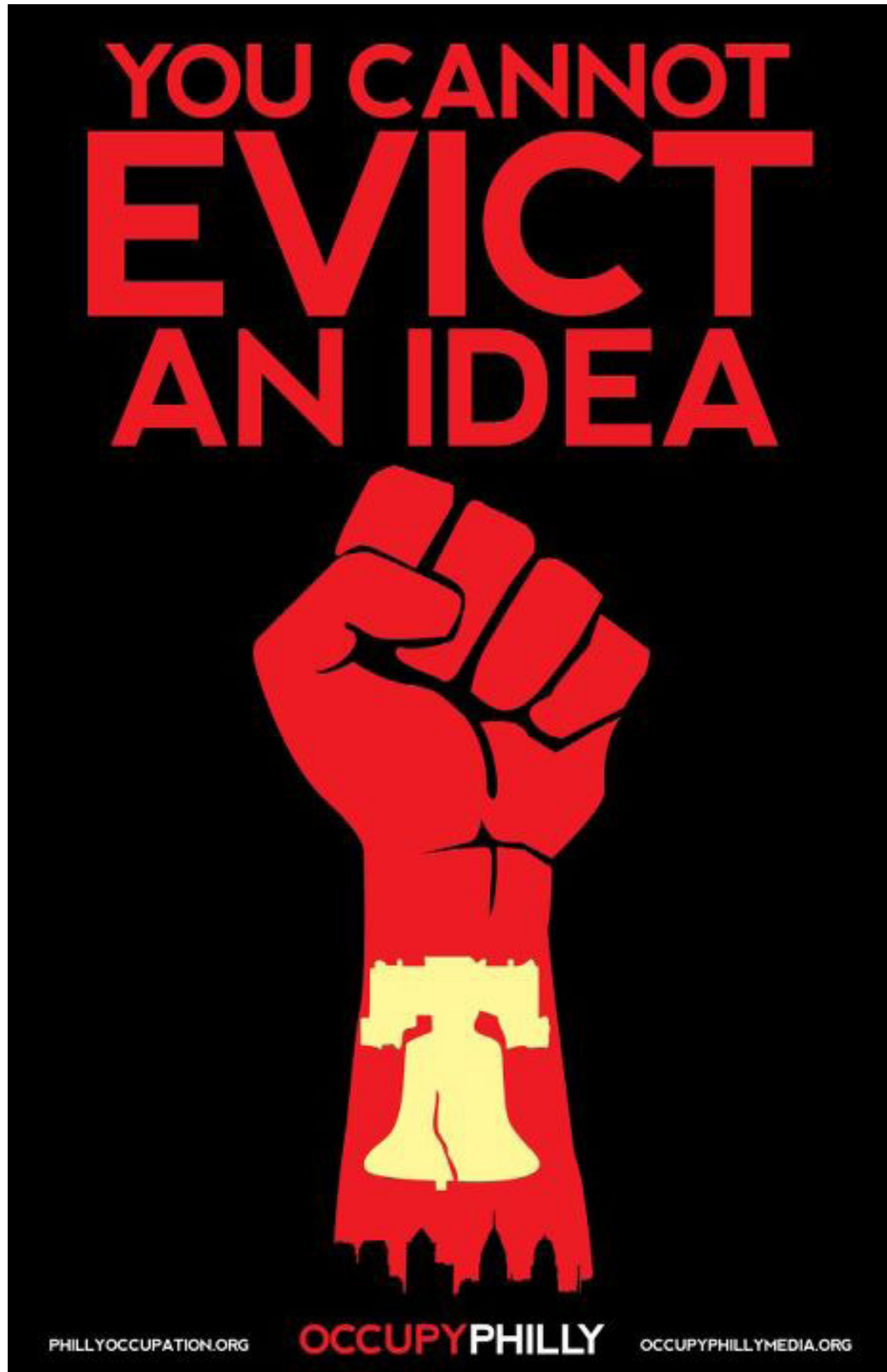
from which it arose, but the nature of which it hasn't really confronted yet. But eviction opens OP to a possible new horizon. First, an opportunity arises not simply to maintain or multiply the occupation but also to begin making it a rupture in the rituals of politics and economics in Philadelphia. This is the chance to occupy not only space but also the processes and flows of the city in ways capable of disrupting and rearranging them. Occupy Oakland attempted something like this in its general strike, an act of occupation that rerouted some of

the ritual movements of bodies and goods through the city. This tendency has already emerged in Philadelphia in budding attempts to prevent the foreclosure of a home in North-West Philly.. These examples represent different, more disruptive and creative kinds of occupation that don't simply take over and maintain a certain space, but also jar loose the deadening, ritualistic processes into which we've been locked. Second, it's possible the eviction can open the movement to a deeper understanding of the systemic nature of the problems it's confronting. It's becoming more and more obvious that politics and economics are processes that reinforce one another at a systemic level: both in the recent coordination of mayors around the country to evict those protesting the political-economic situation, and in Nutter's politics aimed at forcefully plugging the movement back into the normal economic functioning of the city and country.

With the crisis of eviction, then, comes a chance to move past

the occupation's contradictory relation to the city and beyond those strategies that have already been neutralized. This is a chance for Occupy Philly to accelerate and intensify its ruptures with the deadening political and economic ceremonies that hold the status quo so firmly in place.

-John Schultz



prescribed period of time the arrests begin. The whole process looks a lot like going to confession; waiting for one's turn to meet with the absolving priest; and then entering the confessional to receive the necessary penance.

The contradiction between OP's transgressiveness and its obedience comes from its restless attempts to distinguish itself from the political and economic rituals