

MANCHESTER.

insurgent squares.

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"...the people is those who, refusing to be the population, disrupt the system."

Tahrir Square, Assaha-al-Khadra, Syntagma Square, Green Square, Zucotti Park, Paternoster Square, Puerta del Sol, Plaza de la Catalunya: these are just a few of the public (occasionally privately owned) spaces that have recently become engrained in our symbolic universe as emblematic sites of insurrectional geographies. Their names stand as *points de capion* that quilt a chain of meaning through signifiers like democracy, revolution, freedom, being-in-common, solidarity, emancipation. The emergence of political space, these insurrections suggest, unfolds through a political act that stages collectively the presumption of equality and affirms the ability of 'the People' to self-manage and organise its affairs. It is an active process of intervention through which (public) space is reconfigured and through which – if successful – a new socio-spatial order is inaugurated. The taking of urban public spaces has indeed always been, from the Athenian *ochlos* demanding to be part of the polis to the heroic struggle of the Tunisian people, the hallmark of emancipatory geo-political trajectories.

Beginning with the French urban revolts of autumn 2005, retaking streets and squares choreographed political struggle over the past few years as protests jumped around from Copenhagen to Rome, from Chicago to Riga, and Stockholm to Sama (Yemen). In the spring/summer of 2011, the *indignados* (the outraged) occupied central urban squares in Madrid, Barcelona, and Athens (amongst other cities) to demand 'democracy now'. Rarely in history have so many people voiced their discontent with the political and economic blueprints of the elites and signalled a desire for an alternative design of the city and the world.

These urban insurrections are indeed telltale symptoms of the contemporary urban order, an order that began to implode, both physically and socially, with the onslaught, in the fall of 2007, of the deepest crisis of capitalism in the last seventy years, a crisis that finally exposed the flimsy basis on which the fantasy of a neoliberal design for the city and the world of the 21st-century was based. Alain Badiou recently explored the significance of these insurrectional events in *The Reawakening of History (Le Réveil de l'Histoire)*. For him, the proliferation of these insurgencies is a sign of a return of the universal Idea of freedom, solidarity, equality and emancipation. An Idea/Imaginary cannot find grounding without localisation. A political moment is always placed, invariably in a public space (irrespective of the formal ownership relations). At the same time, insurrectional activity is intense; it requires the concentration of enormous vital energies for a sustained period of time. And finally, it brings together a wide range of individuals who in their multiplicity stand for the metaphorical condensation of *The People* (as a political, not a demographic, category). However, such intense localised practices can only be a political event, not a political procedure. The key political question is what happens when the squares are cleared, the tents removed and the energies dissipate?

What is required now is to take these proto-political localised events to a spatially political 'truth' procedure. The latter revolves squarely around questions of political organisation, the arena of struggle, and the construction of new political collectivities. The urgent tasks revolve around universalising the Idea materialised in these events and the mobilisation of new political subjects who are not afraid to demand the impossible, stage the new, and confront the violence that will inevitably intensify as those who insist to maintain the present order realise that their days might be numbered.

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HACKNEY.

symbolic stasis.

m.gandy

On the morning of Tuesday 20th December I visited the occupation outside St. Paul's Cathedral in central London. This extensive cluster of tents now forms part of a multi-site protest across the capital. Contrary to mainstream media reports of disorder and squalor, I found a clean, friendly and well organised site for around 200 people with a series of focal points for information, food and sanitary facilities. At the centre of the site is a dedicated space for education and debate called the "tent city university" that serves as a focal point for the sharing of skills and ideas. My guide around the site was a molecular cell biologist who worked for cancer charities before joining the Occupy movement: his open and engaging approach to visitors filled me with a sense of pride that London – my city – was now part of an international upsurge of democratic protest against global capitalism.

The location of the protest on "public space" within the Corporation of London is highly poignant, since this is the only administrative district in the city that is not democratically elected. This secretive entity, which is leading the legal challenge to the occupy movement, lies at the heart of Britain's financial services industry and serves as the hub for the UK's international role in money laundering and tax avoidance¹. Any attempt to reform the Corporation or scrutinise its assets has been repeatedly thwarted and forms a corollary of the wider failure to regulate the financial services sector that caused the economic crisis of 2008, which has now been transformed by ideological sleight of hand into a public sector debt crisis.

The Occupy movement in London and elsewhere is building a political constellation that encompasses a range of issues such as poverty, homelessness, food and animal welfare, tax avoidance, human rights, civil liberties, environmental justice, the nefarious reach of the arms and security indus-

tries, and many other areas of concern.

The movement is being led by young people who realise that their aspirations for themselves and society cannot be met by the current system: we are entering a period of downward mobility, falling real incomes and widening socio-economic disparities. Contra-theorists of radical change are better served by more circumspect commentators such as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who has long emphasised the remarkable resilience and intractability of social inequality through its multiple filters of culture, gender, power and "symbolic violence"².

The peaceful occupation of public space as a form of protest is interesting since this use of "symbolic stasis" counters the admonition to keep moving through space; to stay still disrupts the logic of the contemporary city as little more than a zone of consumption and entertainment.

In some American cities the state has resorted to violence to forcibly remove urban protests, and it remains to be seen whether London will follow this route: reactionary elements of the British press are stirring up public indignation in the hope that authorities will be goaded towards violence. I hope that the occupations are still here in the summer of 2012 as a radical counterpoint to the London Olympics and its vapid narrative of national renewal and social cohesion.

1. See Nicholas Shaxson, *Treasure island: tax havens and the men who stole the world* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011). On the day I visited the site the UK Parliament's Public Accounts Committee estimated that there were at least 25 billion pounds in unpaid taxes by leading UK corporations.

2. See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of resistance: against the new myths of our time*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

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