

Tom Coles “Organise your mourning”

Endless Growth

“Under capital, austerity is necessary.”
(Escalate Collective, *Salt*, p.4)

The common commitment of the texts *Springtime, Users Guide to Demanding the Impossible*¹, and *The Occupation Cookbook*², which have been produced as responses to a series of struggles since 2008 – struggles against policy, struggles for space, for new ideas – is that they make use of assemblages of materials to try and simultaneously document, promote and develop new forms of resistance. While one struggles to make out easily recognisable formal political projects emerging from what is unsatisfactorily known as ‘this crisis’, all around there seems to be an incessant drive to document every small event. The pieces are typical of the proliferation of tactical documents; documents that collate the detritus from, rather than demonstrate the nature of, this unnameable. Conceding that even an analysis of detritus may help towards a praxis of change, this, to my mind, cannot be undertaken by mimicking in form the professional legislative ‘white paper’ or policy review. The famous dictum of song-writer and poet Joe Hill, “Don’t mourn, organise!”, can be recalibrated as “Organise your mourning”: these documents either mourn or organise, but, crucially, as of yet, our *mourning remains unorganised*. They are users’ guides that operate as quick overviews and re-bakings of old events, movements and motivations to flatten differences of time and space through positing possibly non-existent common motivations or effective forms. Is this a revolutionary tract or a funding proposal? Is it a measurably ‘outcome orientated’ revolutionary practise that would be most useful in this situation? This review is intended as a proposal towards a discourse of resistance that is beginning to resist mere resistance.

The narrative is clear now, every rant written, spoken or declaimed begins with its own version: the banking crisis of 2007/8 quickly became a series of world crises, a complex chain of spatial, institutional and temporal deflections which continues to lengthen, interlink and take the form of a steady inundation. The banking crisis is translatable into a public debt crisis; a US crisis into a European crisis; a public debt crisis has become a crisis of international finance; and this a crisis of international finance is quickly becoming, if it wasn’t already, a crisis of national and international democracy. Greece, Italy and Ireland are occupied by hostile bureaucrats. In our preparation for a decade of deepening economic depression, a deepening of the social effects of these crises should be expected, as should an ebb and flow of social and protest movements in response.

In a year in which so much ‘history’ seems to be taking place – to catch up with the short period of its claimed obliteration between 1989 and 2008 at the hands of what Mark Fisher outlines, in his 2009 book of the same name, as ‘Capitalist Realism’ – there are not only periodisations to be made, but spatialisations. It is the simultaneity of these events combined with their spatial and cultural reach that is so astounding, resulting in a sudden glut of spectacle and movement. For the majority of participants and commentators there is very little contemporary history to compare this with, they stand in amazement or resort to documentation. It should never be forgotten that our culture has a ready stock of the cynical and the superlative, and the amazed stance is a well learned one (as is that of the variably arrogant or cynical commentator) – and its deployment delays analysis. As with BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme, the informed listener is presented with a comprehensive overview of the day’s events *without context*, daily (sometimes hourly) restating that these events are historically *world-changing*, and therefore *beyond analysis*. For example, debate around the alter-globalisation movements of the 1990s is insufficient, despite the similarity of the targets and sentiments. The 1960s is the ubiquitous reference, not only for advertising companies and pop singers but for protesters and commentators. It is now being reconfigured by the ugly fact that we are having to ‘re-live’, rather than simply remember, such complicated historical transitions.

What, it is asked, are the connections between Millbank Square, Puerta del Sol, Tahir Square, Zucotti Park, Paternoster Square? What does it signify that the age-old tactic of ‘occupation’ of public space has become so prevalent as identifiable and visible forms of resistance and protest? Under what circumstances are occupations politically effective, and with what implications?

This exploration will tend to function as a partial (incomplete and partisan) review of the techniques and justifications for operating an occupation, as outlined to a greater or lesser extent in a series of publications and drawing on subsequent interventions – most notably: Danny Hayward’s ‘Adventures in the Sausage Factory’³ published by *Mute*, and *Salt*⁴ by Escalate Collective. It will also

draw on my own experience of the seven-month occupation at the University of Glasgow between February and August 2011, known since as the Free Hetherington.

Springtime

These texts – *Springtime, Users Guide, Occupation Cookbook* – and the manner in which their ideas are expressed, have now been overtaken by events. This is necessary and desirable; as forewords use to say in the future anterior tense: ‘May this book soon become redundant due to the abolition of these problems through struggle!’. When the student protests of 2010, emerging from the short invasion and occupation of Conservative Party HQ on November 10th, were largely put to rest with the passing of the fee hike in the Houses of Parliament on December 9th, many of the arguments produced as agitation became instantly outdated. For those involved, their struggle was immediately followed by more important events in the chain of escalations of popular unrest; the North African self-immolations which triggered a pan-Arab uprising on an unprecedented and unexpected scale. In the face of this example it must be insisted, if we are to have any hope, that the month of protest in Britain does not represent the limit of the reconfiguration of British education politics: the implications of events in the Middle East and North Africa could bring far reaching change. Similarly it is difficult to know what will become of the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement, now that it is being referenced by Bruce Springsteen’s new album. Economic crises are as uneven in their development as growth. In the year after the publication of *Springtime*, a collection of journalism and essays previously published in pamphlets and various blogs, we see that many of their conjectures (“Simmering Greece” outlining the ‘troika’-led collapse of Greek democratic legitimacy, escalating action on US campuses) have now become reality, and grown to a new urgency. The deadly inevitability of the ‘capitalist realist’ construction of ‘no alternative’ and ‘the end of history’ no longer remains self-evident; we can see changes happening, we can see choices being made to achieve those changes however ‘tough’ they may be. Will another moment like ‘68 emerge, where students in France were taken aback at how the edifice fell, like fruit rotted through except for the skin? The growing almanac of minor crises for the UK Government – pasties, police horses, corruption and bought legislation – are surely proxy conflicts masking a larger implicit logic that must become apparent? David Harvey anticipates change for all:

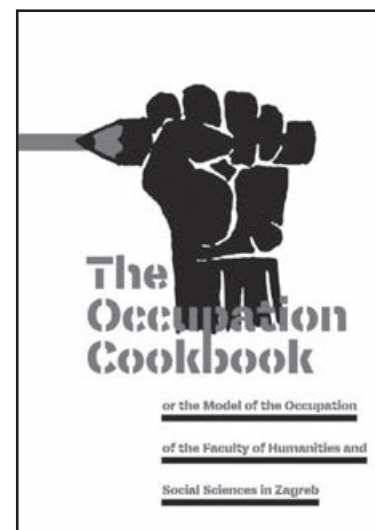
“Can capitalism survive the present trauma? Yes, of course. But at what cost? This question masks another. Can the capitalist class reproduce its power in the face of the raft of economic, social, political and geopolitical and environmental difficulties? Again, the answer is a resounding ‘Yes it can’. This will, however, require the mass of the people to give generously of the fruits of their labour to those in power, to surrender many of their rights and their hard-won asset values (in everything from housing to pension rights) and to suffer environmental degradations galore... More than a little political repression, police violence and militarised state control will be required to stifle the ensuing unrest... The capitalist class cannot, if history is any guide, maintain its power without changing its character...”
(David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, p.215-216)

Springtime, edited by University of London Union president and sudden student leadership figure Clare Solomon, presents itself as a historical source-book, published before the dust has settled. It documents a series of stifled attempts to create an emerging mass mobilisation of students (prevented by not a little political repression). The volume’s impulse – to view documentation and collation as active a protest as any other – is typical of those, for whom transmission is always anterior to content, as they are long used to being bystanders instead of one amongst many agitators. Its temptation is to pre-emptively historicise, to transmit the idea of happening before knowing what is happening, to communicate rather than act upon history: in the case of *Springtime* it is as though the History has pre-empted the event. The inclusion of ‘flashback’ pieces from the 1960s by Eric Hobsbawm, Fritz Teufel and Ernest Mandel stand-in for any new analysis of the history of student radicalism – there is a radical edge to historical re-enactment, but it is the re-enactment of the impulse that is radical, not the reprinting of the articulation – and this is one assessment that will bear on the glut of (profitable?) publishing projects in the near future. However, the inclusion of Nina Power and Peter Hallward (including his blog posts from Cairo as a voice from outside the UK), who, along with Laurie Penny, Peter Osborne, Owen Hatherley and Owen Jones have emerged from the discontent of 2011 as an increasingly recognisable grouping of ‘citizen’-journalists/bloggers and academics, showing the emergence of newer voices. Owen Jones’s appearances on the



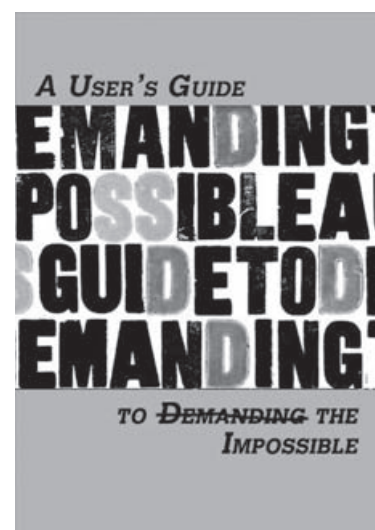
Springtime: The New Student Rebellions

edited by Clare Solomon & Tania Palmieri
Paperback, 296 pages
ISBN: 9781844677405
Verso, September 2011



The Occupation Cookbook: or the Model of the Occupation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb

by various authors, English translation by Drago Markisa / introduction by Marc Bousquet
ISBN 978-1-57027-218-9
Minor Compositions, 2010. Originally published by the Center for Anarchist Studies, 2009



Users Guide to Demanding the Impossible

by Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (John Jordan & Gavin Grindon)
ISBN 978-1-57027-218-9
Minor Compositions, 2010

weekly spectacle of UK ‘democracy’, Question Time, and his and Laurie Penny’s inclusion on other mainstream broadcast channels as tokens of a mostly unheard left-wing voice, is particularly interesting despite the condescension they are shown. This group can be found as initially emerging around the Middlesex University protests (including its occupation) prior to the UK general election in early 2010, when its Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy was closed. The “Con-Lib coalition’s aggressively philistine and class-driven rhetoric was amply anticipated by the Middlesex management” says Hatherley⁵.

More recently, two new texts have appeared that belong to an emerging and productive line of enquiry, self-consciously outlining the underlying situation and political topography on which a coming intervention might act. In January 2012 Escalate Collective, a writing and activist group associated with the University of London, produced the pamphlet *Salt*, demystifying the collapse of the logic of neoliberalism. Later that month *Mute* (tagline: “we would feast on those that would subdue us”) published Danny Hayward’s ‘*Adventures in the Sausage Factory: a cursory overview of the university struggles, November 2010 - July 2011*’. Where the earlier publications left me despondent, these subsequent texts represent an evolving, alternative critique that ought to be of use in coming months to understand the blasted landscape that the receding froth of the earlier wave of publications has left.

Leaderlessness?

Critiques must provide actionable ‘alternatives’ to the stances taken by contemporary representatives and leaders: that of the ineffectual or discredited role of official student representatives who so far, at the very least, have opposed any militant mobilisation; similarly, the positions of trade union leaders have tended towards the conservative; and, perhaps unsurprisingly, mainstream political leaders and their parties have only sought to capitalise on the current popular actions to continue their reactionary policies. This, even as, in the UK and the US, there appears to be a public questioning of some of the consequences of contemporary capitalism.

Even a cursory involvement in the current movements, whether it is the wave of ‘Occupy’ events or the student occupations of 2010/11, gives witness to a characteristic expression and advocacy of ‘leaderlessness’ – something not uniformly practised nor actually attained. Mistakenly, this confusion of ‘leaderlessness’ with declarations of ‘consensus’ (such as through subsequent evocations of a ‘99%’), has led to a disavowal of all hierarchy – viewed as being susceptible to co-option. However, on these flattened swamps of consensus there are bubbles rising.

The ‘Free Hetherington’, a seven month occupation at the University of Glasgow, more or less sincerely attempted (and never achieved) a non-hierarchical formation. Its focus on hierarchy involved continual attempts at the breaking down of accrued status and privilege, rather than seeking to attain the necessary platform – involving a level of hierarchy and leadership – from which effective actions could more quickly flow. The debate over who should speak, when and how, was frustrating for those who saw this as a ‘cultural’ issue irrelevant or subordinate to issues of revolutionary mobilisations and State power. The revolutionary groupings that involved themselves, and participated in these debates, did so principally by their ascetic removal of political tactics such as co-option. This was perhaps the first prominent grass roots political event I have experienced where the question would regularly be asked: ‘Where is the Socialist Workers Party?’ This is not to say that such groupings weren’t influential, but it was more their non-Centralist presence that influenced debate. The implosions of the party political ‘left’ in Scotland have necessitated other stances, thereby opening up other potentialities. There were figures who at times dominated through their regular attendance or their ability to speak, but they either refrained from seeking a formal dominance or could not arrange for it to be conceded to them, and a cultural norm emerged whereby those keenest to

speak were expected to self-censor. The intake of breath and of holding back in political meetings was palpable, if only in comparison to the more usual flow of debate:

“More information is not going to motivate us to act, neither are representations or pictures of politics, what makes us move is tasting dreams of what could be, stepping into the cracks where another world is coming into view.”

(*Users Guide to Demanding the Impossible*, p.25)

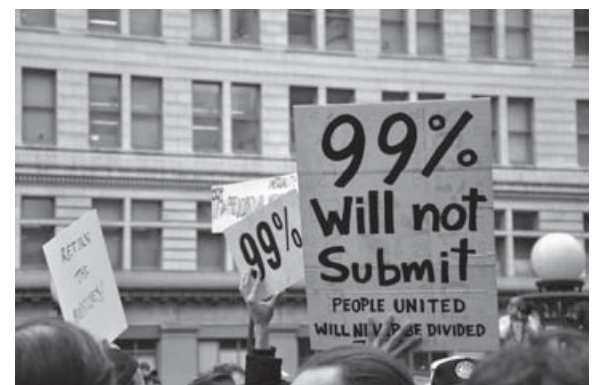
This commitment to pre-figurative politics – ranging from promoting non-gendered terminology, communal vegan cooking, removing images of objectification, running a donation and in-kind economy – was an important experience for many, though difficult to sustain. It has continued subsequently in collective reflection, and, as with campuses across the world, there is an explosion of collectives and reading groups: invitations to join reading groups of Marx’s *Capital* (led online by David Harvey) flooded into inboxes just as reports of police-free streets in Tottenham were pouring in. Marxism and the working class are back as spectre though not as force: *The Telegraph*⁶ raves against ‘far-left’ groups attacking government policy, Conservative MPs have started to blame communists, anarchists and even largely absent unions⁷ for online protests and picketing of abusive employers. Conversely, as the contestation of established institutions began to generalise beyond Universities, the apparent routes of potential action began to narrow. After the experiment of the Hetherington, the local and much national focus of student activism switched to running in student elections. The ‘broad left’ coalitions on campus which had mobilised over 2010/11 attempted to use their new prominence to focus on more traditional attempts to capture supposed power. On some campuses this has been successful, though at the University of Glasgow the ‘OurGlasgow’ coalition campaign narrowly failed to win any of the major positions. Whether those attempting to change institutions like the National Union of Students from within will manage to do so, or are in fact embarking upon a well-worn career path, is yet to be seen.

Endo-Politics

Compare this to the UK/US manifestations of the Occupy Movements, where ‘politics’ is not just mistrusted but actively feared and rejected – because acting politically or ‘politics’ (sometimes ‘as usual’) is seen as the problem. The ‘person in the street’, the authentic individual member of the public, is not interested in the ‘political’, only in challenging injustice: we have politicians to do politics for us, the problem is that they aren’t listening! The failure is seen as one of communication and education, we’re not speaking loudly enough! While much remains uncertain and in flux, the construction and then rejection of a certain image of ‘politics’ among the Occupy Movements results largely from a reductive conflation of the term with ‘party politics’. The result has been a loose consensus for a commitment to a form of ‘distributed protest’, where the job of each activist is to focus on facilitating the voicing of every voice except their own – the isolated voice is mistrusted as a voice of unwelcome authority. The ‘People’s Mic’ of Occupy Wall Street, an echo chamber devised to avoid a local by-law against amplification (crowd repeats the words back to the speaker) is a potent manifestation of this tendency. It is an extremely ‘low bandwidth’ method, which communicates action but rarely allows for extemporisation or rhetorical power.

If the Hetherington said “We are not political!” less loudly, it was because it was understood that the problem is the political process – including those extra-parliamentary tactics commonly practised by progressives – rather than politics as such. This tacit agreement to keep ‘politics’ on the back-burner can quickly become something more unpleasant once it morphs into dogma: within ‘Occupy’ people have been attacked as a dangerous cabal for being ‘Maoists’, ‘Communists’, or, in the furore surrounding Chris Hedges’ criticism of ‘black bloc anarchists’ in Oakland, as simply “criminal”⁸.

For the wider sympathetic constituency that





these protests have managed to activate (and of which it is constituent), it mimics the familiar amplification of the online social network, the repeating is a formal re-occurrence of the impulse to re-blog: such protest today is not *action* – when defined as confrontational counterpower – but is limited to sorting and retransmitting previously existing information which, when done on a mass level, takes on the appearance of political action. The desiderata is no longer the new, but faster and more coherent transmission. In fact the form of a ‘mob’ (to use the terminology of the detractors) has found its closest match in technological form in Twitter and Blackberry messaging – forward forward forward! The message matters little as long as it is passed on. The reciprocal relationship between response and message, both feeding off each other, takes the effect of an increasingly lubricated situation that allows ritualistic dissent to spread more quickly than ever. And as long as it is the communicative rather than the operative that is given primacy, a non-violent fundamentalism prevails – Occupy needs to appear both everywhere and non-threateningly.

The actors congregate around a tactic rather than a political project: a confluence of anger, entertainment, aesthetic and action that comes before understanding or politics, this is not a novelty in terms of historical mobilisations. What is interesting about the new protests is the tendency for protesters to quickly change their designation and apparent allegiance – such as the quick transition from ‘acquiescent’ protester to a more militant stance either in response to police aggression or in order to catch police off-guard.

“Wanton press releases from the Met confirmed this fact, as the authoritarian PR service pumped out anxious declarations about how ‘extremely disappointed’ the service was ‘with the actions of many protesters’, who were evidently becoming more confrontational, quicker and more spirited, more prepared to abandon routes and disregard ‘advice’ issued by frantic ‘organisers’ wherever the balance of forced on the ground demanded it.”

(Danny Hayward, ‘Adventures in the Sausage Factory’, *Mute*)

It is this duplicity and instability of the nature of the crowd which is (quite rightly) identified by security services as a threat of the becoming mob. Similarly there is a worry among organisers (whether it be the NUS at student demonstrations or the adherents of non-violence in Occupy) of the Jekyll and Hyde nature of protests. The infectious nature of these tendencies is latent, initially not apparent and difficult to locate, its almost instantaneous emergence at the protests of 2010/11 reflecting both frustration at further constriction and criminalisation of protest. But key is what Hayward, to my mind rightly, identifies as a revived cross-class mobilisation: it was the ‘EMA kids’, of long-oppressed minority groups, who brought the trouble that so shocked and exhilarated the other students – the ones that truly understood the nature of urban territory. To a great extent the training and development work of the anti-capitalist protesters of the ‘90s, the experience of many during protests against the Iraq War, and the climate change movement, mean that under current conditions there is an available body of experience in society – the potential for co-operation here is astounding and unrealised. That the mobilisations dropped away in militancy and size is largely down to the failure to maintain consistent and reciprocal relationships with the more marginalised protesters. There is a very deep class prejudice at work in those parts of the left dominated by middle classes that find the potential power of cross-class solidarity terrifying – in Glasgow those college and school students who took to the streets at the end of 2010 would, in my experience, be told by police that ‘you don’t belong here’, and they would be looked at suspiciously by the ‘real students’ as potentially disruptive or even dangerous; they were *not like us*. As Danny Hayward neatly summarises in ‘Adventures in the Sausage Factory...’, “Middle class students might piously hope that working class teenagers will be allowed to ‘access’ universities and become more like them.” They might even fight to do so if they believe it is necessary to bolster their own position.

Different and Similar Forms of Dissent

Largely unspoken within the context of all these protests is the biggest determinant of Western foreign and domestic policy in the post-2001 era: the ‘War on Terror’ and its urban militarism. Iranian philosopher Reza Negarestani – whose works of ‘theory-fiction’ I believe usefully explore modern politics – describes the tactics of Jihadis, explaining their strategic response to postmodern and neoliberal hegemonic global politics. There is an overlap in the imagination of some observers (especially policy makers) between the apparent form and effect of the terrorist and the Occupy protester, the ‘Islamist’ and the ‘domestic’ terrorist. Where there may be a similarity between the two is in attempts at moving away from anti-politics into an ‘endo-politics’.

“This, ‘endo-militarization of peace’, a new type of tactical line which totally blends with the enemy’s lines in such a configuration that it introduces radical instability and eventually violent fissions into the system from within... In attempting defence the enemy can only necrotize and dissolve itself.”

(Reza Negarestani, ‘The Militarization of Peace: Absence of Terror or Terror of Absence’, *Collapse I*, ed. R. Mackay. Oxford: Urbanomic, September 2007, p.55-6)

The success of the insurgency – itself a cyclical “blowback”⁹ of US strategy/support for the anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan – has been to entice the repressive apparatus of the State into ‘hyperfoliant’ (excessive and overspeed) cycles of investment in, and development of, containment techniques that, unable to complete the imposition of ‘peace’ on Western societies, and always unable to eliminate the enemy within, will never attain their declared horizon of ‘stability’. While since 2001 the external, ‘Muslim’ enemy has been promoted as the likely terrorist, such constructions are supplemented with the internal threat of the potential catastrophes of dissent and non-competitiveness, as witnessed in the responses to recent workfare protests. More disruptive are the hacktivist tactics of ‘Anonymous’, a sort of online Black Bloc, and the appropriation of ‘meme culture’ as a political vehicle by groups such as DSG (Deterritorial Support Group¹⁰). The cultural, contextual and doctrinal differences between the insurgent ‘network’ of Al Qaeda and the ‘network’ of activist actors cannot be ignored, nor can the former’s willingness to use their own death as a tactic (a doctrine of asymmetric warfare) – nor attempts to criminalise political engagement in the form of dissent/protest by *cynically* conflating the two. However, from a *structural* point of view, they can seem to share a morphology; the flashmob that disrupts a train station or shop *is not* an explosion, but it is a disruption not easily resolved by the authorities, it represents a time-limited interruption of accumulation.

The networks and conceptual arrangements are ‘ad hoc’ in the technical sense. As complex adaptive systems they not only work around the unreliability of individuals, but draw power from it, giving up the discipline of hierarchy for the power of anonymity. The shared technical standards that allow networked computers to replicate information resemble agreements of limited solidarity which can be assumed in situation of unrest. As with any complex system, small core groups and organisations emerge based on affinity and trust, but as with the copy-cat explosions of Occupy (or indeed, the riots in England) there is no need for formal links to exist for a series of events to take on a common external appearance.

When ‘networks’ can “at one moment appear to be universal and at another vanish into thin air”¹¹ the result is that the State’s readiness for excessive violence will find its target in the ‘host population’ of such potential emergences – students, workers and other malcontents. These were recently the (unwitting or complicit?) test group for *spectacular* ‘total policing’ witnessed at the November 9th 2011 student protest. Billed by student organisations as the one year anniversary of the Millbank occupation, it in fact took the form of a parade of (State) force as 10,000 students were chaperoned around the City of London by 4,000 police for the benefit of the camera phones of investment bank staff standing behind floor-to-ceiling windows.

At indeterminate intervals the police would put on their helmets, extend their batons. Later, they would remove their helmets, retract their batons and attempt to chat with protesters. Similar to the appearance of arbitrary escalation by protesters, for protesters the actions of the security forces were just opaque. Suddenly, a three-layered blockade of officers would present itself, flanked by horses. The ‘militarisation of peace’, and of the police – distending the accepted distribution of violence dictating social relations – results in the well documented systematic use of anti-terrorist legislation against ‘regular’ citizens, designating them ‘domestic extremists’.

“Today, strikes remain battle re-enactments – but re-enactments which exist *solely* within the realm of cathartic performativity. Institutionalised by the state, neutralised through anti-union legislation, strikes become dress rehearsals for nothing – since all claim to challenging state violence has been forsaken. They can neither be ‘political’ (the assertion of labour against capital; the product of class consciousness) nor consecutive (where they could threaten infinitude). Reduced to the status of impromptu public holiday, defined by *action-as-symbolism*, the new strike abandons politics for theatre: a gesture not of antagonism but of conciliation, reinforcing its impotence in every moment of its articulation.” (Escalate, *Salt*, p.15-16)

This is the space prepared for us, but where in the past there was a managed political consensus – be it by Union leaders, officers, the Labour party, the courts – on occupying this space, there is a new attempt to keep the shape of that consensus not by politics but by blunt force. The enforced carnivals that are one-off occasions, such as football matches or the Commonwealth Games, are the model for protest. Protest quickly becomes another form of entertainment, but it can quickly return to the political: the ‘Kelvingrove Party’ was an example of this. Following on from David Cameron’s invitation to celebrate the Royal Wedding, with its on-the-ground class and sectarian tensions, it quickly became a riot. The skill embodied in the techniques of cultural production under capitalism are formidable, as Mark Fisher puts it: “authenticity has proven highly marketable”¹². The ‘Great Britain: You’re Invited’ ad campaign focusing on images of Tudor villages and Highland scenery grates with the February announcement of the deployment of surface-to-air missiles to ‘protect athletes’ confirming the 2012 Olympic Games as a London-based ‘Green Zone’: “Why will an unmanned drone be flying over the London Olympics next year in 2012” asks Escalate (p.47), while Francis Fukuyama explains “Why we all need a drone of our own”¹³. History has restarted, and the theoriser of its end is arming himself, as if a State-driven hyper-inflation of the full-spectrum panopticon and dispersed militarism runs counter to, rather than continuous with, State violence. Indeed, some appear to propose that certain of these technologies, assuming access, may, at least for a short time, provide advantages that can be used in the interests of the oppressed while primarily being tools of oppression:

“Know your enemy – how it moves, reacts, changes shape, lies. Know your material – the people and movements around you, the places you occupy, the desires you keep.... Take up residence in the thing you will transform, flow with it until your relationship becomes seamless. Feel its patterns and networks so deeply that they somehow become you.” (Users Guide to Demanding the Impossible, p.13)

The role of University occupations for ‘re-appropriation’, as the Hetherington was, applies a technique which can also be found in Negarestani’s Jihadi, or the Users Guide’s model artist – “take up residence in the thing you will transform” – in a strained effort to become a site for a general social dissent. One of the key demands of university authorities, one that was never granted, was that the occupation should be able to prove that all occupiers of the building were enrolled as students – members of the public could have no legitimate interest in the fate of higher education. This demand is usually acceded to – often without question by student occupations that contain no non-students – but turns a potential re-appropriation by the community into a recuperation on behalf of the power structures of the University. As long as



it remains within the University body, protest and rebellion can be billed as a part of the lively student experience, a safely bounded constituency where disputes remain on-campus. It was this mixture of constituents, and the attempt to project messages beyond the recuperative structures of the University bodies into wider society, that is necessary and which often cannot occur.

By sitting directly on a nexus between the State, the Church and the City of London, Occupy the London Stock Exchange pulled a largely unexpected but impressive feat. By turning the dead transit spaces between Paternoster Square and St. Paul’s into a public place it acted as a significant enough irritation (intentionally or not) to elicit a process of systematic over-reaction. The tools brought to bear: first ‘Health and Safety’, then the legal process contorts to find purchase on an assembly which eschews individualism, the basis of the judicial system. This was, for one, exemplified in the judgement delivered in the case of the Fortnum & Mason’s sit-in “that each defendant did take part by encouraging others with his or her presence”. The systematic reaction of councils and local governments to occupations exposes the impasse between the administration and the administrated. A similar narrative played out in the occupation at the University of Glasgow. First control was applied to occupiers for their own safety, then appeals were made to vacate the building so it could be returned to the use of staff and students (for which it was intended), before the authorities resorted to a violent eviction. Months after the occupation ended, the building is still shuttered.

Collectivisms

“The most important trait of the media strategy was depersonalization.... The reason for this was not because students feared possible sanctions, but rather because they wanted to emphasize the collectivity of the action and the general demands which concern not individuals but the society in general. This was also a way to avoid creating leaders and recognizable individuals who might avert the media’s attention from the action and its goals, reducing it to a vehicle for turning several ‘leading’ students into new media stars.... The continuous rotation of spokespersons (as well as delegates and plenum moderators) served to ensure that the plenum is the collective and only political subject of the action.” (Occupy Cookbook, p.55)



This demonstrative submission by the individual to the ‘multitude’¹⁴ is the key marker of membership of the new protest movements. Often this formal submission is a form of cynical Pieta, where those cradling, mourning and celebrating the dying of leadership figures will soon be the new leaders. The idea of leaving formal positions of responsibility vacant is not new; in fact it is the essential truth underlying capitalism’s vigorousness. The occupation of the Hetherington, like the Occupy Movement, consciously used this logic as a simple technique to derail criticism. By insisting that everyone is welcome to make their views heard (including University administrators, Mayors, Police officials, and other opponents) it makes opposition more difficult. In short, critics must submit to the operational structures of the General Assembly to reject the General Assembly. The response to critics is simple: come down and make your view heard. The alternative democracy of the recuperated space, like the mass ‘democracy’ of the Nation State, demands that the enemies of a structure accept that structure, one which is well placed to defend itself in its own terms and can claim tacit legitimacy. Liberal societies promote the equality of the laws and institutions, while ignoring the arguably more important inequalities of social and economic relations. Occupy and similar movements promote the legitimacy of their arguments while ignoring their lack of power, defining non-violence as an unwavering moral principle rather than a tactic. In trying to use the power of the multitude, while denying the use of force by any tendencies in that multitude, they fail to acknowledge that there is a problem with saying violence is never justified:

“Power needs no justification, being inherent in the very existence of political communities; what it does need is legitimacy... Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow. Legitimacy, when challenged, bases itself on an appeal to the past, while justification relates to an end that lies in the future. Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate.” (Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*,¹⁵ p.52)

The ethico-political response of the pre-existing – in the case of the University of Glasgow, the role of student bodies – is to sustain the structuring principle that there are ‘legitimate’ and right decision making bodies of a non-political authority. This was seen in the response by University management, who stated that they would not negotiate with people who violated the concept of rightful property ownership. The power of an occupation is that it matches a demand that can be seen as legitimate by the current system – ‘no fees, no cuts’ – with a certain amount of (‘illegitimate’) hard power – ‘this building is ours’. It creates lines of defence and sovereign boundaries that are to be defended, usually passively, and invites possibilities to cross those boundaries. This poses a problem for the ‘legitimate’ bodies, who must respond with active violence against the power of passive resistance, which will be justified as necessary to restore some form of status quo, but will, as Arendt states, never be legitimate. Slavoj Žižek suggests “political space is never ‘pure’ but always involves some kind of reliance on ‘pre-political’ violence”¹⁶, and, to go beyond Arendt, aggressive use of violence by those who nominally have power actively saps whatever legitimacy is appealed to. This sapping of legitimacy is the necrosis identified by Reza Negarestani cited above. As Escalate outline in *Salt*, “you can only asset strip once” (p.38). The legitimacy of the post war consensus was based on welfare – universal healthcare, guaranteed housing, and, if capitalism cannot provide you with work, guaranteed benefits. After the London riots this logic has returned as censure, where councils (Conservative and Labour) threatened the families of rioters with the loss of their council houses. However, as the state hollows, privatising housing, utilities, transport, healthcare and education, when “there are no means of purchasing a new class base” (p.41), and it is the very people who gained from ‘right to buy’ schemes who are now losing their homes, the only resort may be violent suppression. “Where social peace can be ensured only by the

police... the class struggle is converted ever more definitely into a situation of war" (p.50). Even commentators on the *Daily Mail* website have started referring to the return of the days when the police were more readily understood as being the "paramilitary arm of the conservative party."¹⁷

This spectre of oppression will appear more on more – it is repeated on a small level with every eviction that takes place. This is particularly noticeable in the controversy surrounding the use of 'pepper spray' against a sit-down protest at University of California, Davis, on November 18th 2011. The most widely circulated video¹⁸, which attracted around 1.5 million online viewings within 3 days, is edited to show none of the limited confrontation between police and protesters, instead focusing on the particularly gladiatorial flourish of one of the officers involved and this direct act of violence – the spraying of sedentary protesters with chemical agents (to use language which re-animates the violence quashed in the name 'pepper-spray'). This is designed to further decontextualise and erase all possible legitimisation of the officers' actions. It has been called a 'Bull Connor' moment in the media, referring to the use of fire-hoses and dogs against peaceful civil rights protesters in May 1963. This focus on the violent moment delegitimises the authority of the (civic) State, while, in a similar way, representations of violence among protesters seek to delegitimise their claim to power. The media focus on violence in protests appears to have the effect of seemingly eradicating politics from the narrative, and of turning it into a moral game of good vs. evil. On March 26th 2011 the Hetherington was evicted by police, though there was active resistance and attempts to break through police lines by protesters, the final image of the day presented by the media was that of almost a hundred officers used to evict half a dozen students.

Manuals for Action

The Zagreb occupation, outlined in *The Occupation Cookbook* lasted for 35 days in protest against tuition fees. It was organised around a 'plenum', or general assembly, which was designated the "central organ of decision making" (p.19). The Cookbook/Manual, like any such blueprint document, presents an ideal that almost certainly was not achieved. At the Hetherington the result of the 'plenum' format was often a constant deferral with a specific result: acceptable inaction. The tactic of peaceful occupation can have only limited claims to power: 1) to present a serious enough alternative to the normal power relations to represent a formidable *challenge* of legitimacy, or 2) to halt the operation of the target institution to such an extent that they choose to act (in the public eye) in a disproportionate manner, leading similarly to a *crisis* of legitimacy. For both, the concept of 'legitimacy' hinges on a perceived continuity of a public consensus around underlying desires for social justice and/or solidarity. The Zagreb occupation attempted the first method: "What does it mean to 'occupy' a school? A school occupation is not, as the corporate media like to portray it, a hostile takeover. A school occupation is an action by those who are already its inhabitants – students, faculty, and staff – and those for whom the school exists. (Which is to say for a public institution, the public itself.) The actions termed 'occupations' of a public institution, then, are really re-occupations, a renovation and reopening to the public of a space long captured and stolen by the private interests of wealth and privilege. The goal of this renovation and reopening is to inhabit school spaces as fully as possible, to make them truly habitable – to make the school a place fit for living." (*The Occupy Cookbook*, p.7)

Off With Our Heads!

The idea that if citizens remain passive in the streets – thus allowing the state to oppress us directly and violently – then the 'masses' will be able to recognise injustice and rise, is beginning to wear thin. It is an essential failure of liberalism to assume that all political actors have the same general interest in a 'good' society, that it can be achieved through discussion, and that all bad behaviours are merely error. It also presupposes a degree of access to and transparency of public



communication in the form of 'the media'. This was, however, to some extent, the stance of the Hetherington: publicly it was framed as a re-appropriation of education, privately we understood that the best chance of producing a political effect was a violent confrontation where the occupiers could be positioned as victims – but where was justice to be imposed from?

But requiring punishment from the state is as useless a route towards autonomy as requiring praise or pity. There is an increasing seriousness and movement from ironies to concrete affirmation and direct conflict. This is different to the previous tendency to push protest into the realm of self-expression and entertainment. Instead of finding release in the assemblage and carnivalesque there are indications that a new seriousness is breaking out: "The beauty of protest is not simply about how it looks, the fun and pleasure it engenders in our bodies, but as importantly it's about its success. ... nothing is more beautiful than winning." (*Users Guide*, p.57) There is an important opportunity (the example here being the *Users Guide*) for art practise to move into the politics of work, to produce victories rather than artworks. All around, more artists are downing tools and beginning to discuss rather than 'produce': in New York the Arts and Labour group of Occupy Wall Street have demanded the end of the Whitney Biennial, pointing out its position in the apparatus of the State and the abusive practices of key sponsors such as Sothebys and Deutsche Bank¹⁹. Will the Whitney take the joke, react angrily, ignore it or absorb it? As Art Not Oil have found in attempting to publicly shame UK institutions such as the Tate's continuing co-reliance on BP sponsorship, assuming a moral high ground for the arts does little to account for the conservative nature of its public and practitioners or shared institutional value systems. One of the key logics of direct action is to destabilise a situation enough that forces of authority will react – and by reacting against a fissure the authority widens the gap between itself and the processes by which it constructs its legitimacy.

Such an over-reaction took place in California – the police spraying chemical agents on students sitting peacefully on the ground. It also took place during the UK education protests with the use of mounted police charging 'kettled' protesters.

The spectre here is the precedence of the Kent State shootings of 1970. As one of the key delegitimising moments against expansion of the Vietnam War it is seen as a model turning point in struggle: the hyperbolic cries of 'brutality' and 'shame' during every encounter with the police may be a willfully amnesic, though not inaccurate, calling out of the repressive and deadly nature of state violence. While at the Free Hetherington the precedent of an autonomous space was important both in principal and as an organising hub for action and education, equally important was that we waited for the use of force.

"...the government... itself begins to filter, purge and hunt down its own civilians, curtailing their rights, confining them to economic, social and political quarantine to isolate or even purge the disease and its potential hosts at the same time."

(Reza Negarestani, *The Militarisation of Peace*, p.62)

One concern with such a 'quarantine' is the fear of the activist in the face of potentially deadly violence; it is not enough to be angry and act, it is necessary to find a way of holding out. The new protests are not a demand for death. They have, however, organised around a self-produced vacuum of leaders and demands which are a result of what is commonly thought of as a postmodern crisis of grand narratives – there is a form of Protest Realism that, like 'Capitalist Realism', "...no longer stages this kind of confrontation with modernism. On the contrary, it takes the vanquishing of modernism for granted; modernism is now something that can periodically return, but only as a frozen aesthetic style, never as an ideal for living."²⁰ We have the slogans of 1968, of 1917 even, but it is all already aesthetic. The events remain primarily reformist, incipient rebellion is rehabilitated in advance and radical critiques are quickly overcome and made redundant due to the pace of neoliberal 'shock and awe' – what Naomi Klein famously describes in her 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine* as 'disaster capitalism'. Why, after

all, are some people demanding free education but not free food? ‘Shock and awe’ seems clearly to be the tactic of the current UK administration: NHS privatisation is eclipsed by privatisation of the roads, the police, and so on, backwards and forwards. The initial crisis of 2007/8 is used as cover for a series of social dismemberments and instead of providing an increasing stock of motivational injustices, the protest movements are increasingly silenced by the weight and speed. An echo of political death returned shockingly with the suicide of 77-year-old Dimitris Christoulas who shot himself outside the Greek Parliament on April 4th 2012; unlike the young Mohamed Bouazizi, who set fire to himself on December 28th 2010 in Tunisia, Christoulas’s anger was no longer directed only at a government but the people who were too passive, writing in his suicide note:

“I believe that youth who have no future will one day take up arms and hang the national traitors upside-down in Syntagma square just as the Italians did in 1945 to Mussolini.”²¹

‘Occupy’ in its current form will probably not work for much longer, and as a single tactic is not enough – in many locales the state can be seen to have eradicated resistance through the use of greater force – but it has got us a long way: Does anyone believe the other when she declares ‘we have nothing to lose’? If there was really nothing to lose, would campaigners still be mobilising around defending single issue campaigns?

As stated at the beginning of this piece, the dictum of protest singer Joe Hill (‘Don’t mourn, organise’) can be recalibrated as “organise your mourning”. Too much can be made of apparent novelty: organisation, communication and co-operation are common to all historical periods, and political experiences today are not fundamentally different than in the past. It is their ornament and a lack of historicity which obscure this. They still predominate on the street, they still rely on territorial concepts, they still produce the exhilarating feeling of licence and comradeship. Tragedy, resistance and community are everywhere at lower or higher intensities. They are not enough. Critically, and yet again, we need a new form to inhabit. To restate the Salt Collective, rather than merely quote: under capital, austerity is necessary. It should be remembered that the social wage and the settlement for those subsisting under capital *has always been austere*.

First the tragedy, then the funeral, then...

What would an organised mourning look like? As the *Users Guide* says, “Nothing is more beautiful than winning”. This is not a co-ordinate but a common direction of travel. It is to abandon the image in favour of the event, or, more accurately perhaps, it is to consciously appreciate the necessity of an orientation with which to position our values, processes, tactics. and objectives. The tragic becomes farce only because the mistakes of the past have not been appropriately understood and buried – the capitalism we hoped had died in 2007 must be dug up and reburied with the social consensus that has preceded it into the grave. Taking the worst seriously is not very different to what the pessimist does today: we would announce the failure of our projects before we have attempted them, we would take on the grief of our incapacity to change our situation. We would accept the return of the past, and rely on the fact that this time the same will be not better or more bearable but different. If we are mourning the wastage of our lives under capital, it must be an ‘organised mourning’. What is key is taking the horror, the scale and the intensity seriously. We cannot demand our own immiseration, but we can mobilise it as it happens. As organisational form switching overspeeds, technological fact overcomes legal and national barriers for communication, and techniques of co-operation become more permissive – that as the machine begins to heat up and lose control then we can imagine a coming social [eu]catastrophe. Our civilization is a blight, and whatever happens next, it will be worse for all involved.



Notes

- 1 PDF available freely online: <http://www.minorcompositions.info/usersguide.html>
- 2 PDF available freely online: <http://www.minorcompositions.info/occupationcookbook.html>
- 3 ‘Adventures in the Sausage Factory: a cursory overview of the university struggles, November 2010 - July 2011’, by Danny Hayward, *Mute*, January 2012. PDF freely available online: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/adventures-sausage-factory-cursory-overview-uk-university-struggles-november-2010-%E2%80%93-july-2011>
- 4 *Salt*, by Escalate Collective, January 2012. PDF freely available online: <http://www.escalatecollective.net/?p=32>
- 5 ‘The Occupation of Space’, Owen Hatherley, *Afterall*, 21 October 2010: <http://www.afterall.org/online/the-occupation-of-space>
- 6 ‘Tiny band of left-wing radicals bring jobs policy to its knees’, Patrick Sawyer and Robert Mendick, *The Telegraph*, 25 February 2012: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9105983/Tiny-band-of-left-wing-radicals-bring-jobs-policy-to-its-knees.html>, 25.2.2012
- 7 ‘Owen Jones: If trade unions don’t fight the workers’ corner – others will’, Owen Jones, *The Independent*, 2 March 2012: <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/owen-jones-if-trade-unions-dont-fight-the-workers-corner—others-will-7468921.html>
- 8 ‘The Cancer in Occupy’, Chris Hedges, *Truthdig*, 6 February 2012: http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_cancer_of_occupy_20120206/
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- 10 ‘Autonomy Tonight / Utopia Tomorrow: DSG is over’: <http://deteritorialsupportgroup.wordpress.com/>
- 11 Hardt & Negri, *Multitude* (London, Penguin: 2004)
- 12 Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009) p.14
- 13 ‘Why we all need a drone of our own’, Francis Fukuyama, *Financial Times*, 24 February 2012: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9cc59dce-5e27-11e1-8c87-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1rd6OSgML>
- 14 Hardt and Negri’s: “The deterritorializing power of the multitude is the productive force that sustains Empire and at the same time the force that calls for and makes necessary its destruction.” Hardt, Michael & Negri, Antonio, *Empire*. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000) p. 61
- 15 Arendt, Hannah, *On Violence* (Orlando, Harcourt, 1969)
- 16 ‘The Obscenity of Human Rights: Violence as Symptom’, Slavoj Žižek, *lacan.com*, 2005: <http://www.lacan.com/zizviol.htm>; *libcom.org*, 2011: <http://libcom.org/library/the-obscenity-of-human-rights-violence-as-symptom>
- 17 ‘Tories order police to halt workfare demos as MP makes formal protest to BBC over bias in favour of hard-Left militants’, Simon Walters and Glen Owen, *Daily Mail Online*, 26 February 2012: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2106601/Tories-order-police-halt-workfare-demos-MP-makes-formal-protest-BBC-bias-favour-hard-Left-militants.html>
- 18 ‘UC Davis Protestors Pepper Sprayed’, 18 November 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AdDLhPwpp4>
- 19 ‘2012 Whitney Biennial to open March 1; Museum breaks with two Corporate Sponsors, apologizes to participating artists’: <http://whitney2012.org>
- 20 Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009)
- 21 The translated, full text of Dimitris Christoulas’s suicide note is reported as reading: “The Tsolakoglou government has annihilated all traces

for my survival, which was based on a very dignified pension that I alone paid for 35 years with no help from the state.

And since my advanced age does not allow me a way of dynamically reacting (although if a fellow Greek were to grab a Kalashnikov, I would be right behind him), I see no other solution than this dignified end to my life, so I don’t find myself fishing through garbage cans for my sustenance.

I believe that young people with no future will one day take up arms and hang the traitors of this country at Syntagma square, just like the Italians did to Mussolini in 1945.”