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Popular Movements in Public Space

A Geographical Analysis of Occupy Wall Street

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Contents

Introduction	2
Popular Movements.....	2
Beginning of OWS	8
Methodology.....	10
Regional Analysis.....	17
Public Space	19
Public Identities.....	24
Public eviction	27
Concluding Remarks.....	31
<i>Figure 1: Active OWS Movements in Continental US as of May 1, 2012.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Figure 2: Once Active OWS Movements and Solidarity Protests in the Continental US.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Figure 3: All Occupations and Population in the Continental US by County.....</i>	<i>15</i>

Introduction

The popular movement “Occupy Wall Street” (OWS) came into existence due to widespread frustration with the political and economic structure of the United States and momentum drawn from movements in North Africa and the Middle East, known as the “Arab Spring”. This paper seeks to describe what OWS is, how it was sparked, and how it developed by analyzing it as a popular movement ignited both by the Arab Spring and by a growing dissatisfaction with economic inequality in the US, which was further enflamed by the government bailouts of 2008-9. A regional analysis of the different OWS branded movements across the US will be presented as well as an analysis of how OWS challenged Americans’ perceptions of public space.

Popular Movements

OWS is a popular movement, which differentiates it from social movements such as the civil rights and feminist movements. Popular movements are a sign that something in the inner workings of a society isn’t working to the benefit of a significant percentage of the population. According to the Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci, (1995, p.1) “Movements are a sign; they are not merely an outcome of the crisis, the last throes of a passing society. They signal a deep transformation in the logic and the processes that guide complex societies.” The catalyst for popular movements, according to Touraine (1998, p.64), are the “decomposition of a threatened social system”, and “when physical and cultural existence becomes threatened” (Touraine 1981, p.78). Popular movements are not spontaneous, but rather are the result of pressures within society reaching a critical point. The more informed citizens are, the quicker

populist pressure builds. The more the state suppresses populist sentiment, the more powerful the impact becomes on society when a popular movement erupts. This is why in countries such as Egypt where the government had long controlled the media, but whose citizenry had grown more informed via the Internet, the protests were particularly explosive.

In defining OWS as a contemporary popular movement, it is important to describe what differentiates a contemporary popular movement from a traditional social movement. Social movements traditionally are formed by a call to action driven by a plan, while popular movements are comprised of actors that are “merely the expression of social contradictions or the conveyor of natural forces.” (Touraine 1981, p.78) Melucci lays down the framework of a “contemporary movement”, which he describes as a series of shared characteristics common and unique to movements occurring during the latter part of the twentieth century. Melucci stresses that contemporary movements are communicative, not action oriented. In contemporary society, people are quick to judge movements based on their efficacy of making a tangible impact on institutions. This has been the case with OWS, which has faced criticism from the press and the public for not organizing an agenda in a fashion similar to a social movement. Melucci refers to the method of seeking political channels within the system to achieve specific goals as the “resolutionary approach”. Historically, social movements have lived and died by the resolutionary approach. In contrast, popular movements should be analyzed by the “listening approach” which views the movement as a warning sign about society. Popular movements are by definition a bit mindless and disorganized. Before people know what to do, they feel the need to say something. OWS provided a loose collection of ideas

and rhetoric which could be broadly interpreted to address most grievances with the political and economic system in the United States.

Movements are comprised of actors fighting for a common cause. The cause could be anything, including protest for the sake of protest. What makes popular movements unique is that they often do not have a unified cause or agenda. They are driven just as much by anger as they are by organized planning. Their leadership structure is disorganized, if at all existent. This makes them susceptible to being co-opted by radical elements which can drive them in a violent, chaotic direction. In the words of Melucci, "The intellectuals who claim to represent the good conscience or the true ideology of a movement have always participated in preparing the way for the advent of the Prince, only to end up as either his victims or his courtiers." (Melucci 1995, p.2)

OWS has not been co-opted in such a fashion largely because its reputation as a "leaderless", unorganized movement is false. It has a horizontally structured leadership that lacks hierarchy. There are in fact many motivated, organized leaders of the movement who provide the core of its strength. Some core activists used donations to travel around the country, visiting different Occupy sites and sharing ideas.

When citizens feel restricted in their ability to change their society through the traditional political means that the government allows them, popular movements provide an outlet that allows society "to explore the formation of new identities, the emergence of new political and social actors, the creation of new political space, and the overall expansion of civil society." (Hellman 1994, p.124) How citizens perceive their own identity in relation to power

plays a key role in the power of the state itself. A powerful state full of powerless citizens is a hollow shell, waiting to collapse.

In the case of OWS, the identity is that of an anonymous, cross cultural collective that has emerged as both a political and social actor. The OWS movement has found the space within the established channels of political action to be woefully inadequate, resulting in an attempt to expand the “political space” to include itself. As a sign to the government, the media corporations and society, OWS symbolically began to occupy public space in parks and plazas indefinitely. “Urban popular movements have resisted the clientelistic and patrimonial controls... rejecting the political culture of petitions and concessions in favor of popular projects and political confrontation.” (Foweraker and Craig 1990, p.29) OWS could not operate within the accepted confines of what “protest” was in the United States, because it felt compelled to not plead for change so much as demand it. In order to express this feeling it drew inspiration from the Arab Spring and decided to occupy public space.

The most significant aspect of OWS relative to other popular movements is that it is occurring within the United States. Scholarship on popular movements has been concentrated primarily in developing countries, especially in Latin America. The demands of OWS are in the same spirit of these popular protests that have occurred in Latin America, and recently in the Arab world. It is important to understand that popular movements, from beginning to end, are products of the society from which they sprouted. “Relationships with the outside—with competitors, allies and adversaries—and especially the response of the political system and the apparatuses of social control define a field of opportunities and constraints within which the collective action takes shape, perpetuates itself, or changes.” (Melucci 1995, p.4) The United

States' status as a post-industrial society with great ethnic diversity and a population exceeding over three hundred million provides a unique setting for the emergence of a popular movement. The United States has a strong history of social movements in the twentieth century, including women's rights, civil rights and LGBTQ rights. All of these movements have strong advocacy groups and lobbyists that work for their interests today, to enforce and push the changes that they have achieved through legislation. Social movements such as these, as well as special interest groups and other components of "civil society" have had success in producing cultural changes which benefit specific groups of people. While the Supreme Court has shown sympathy to these groups through decisions such as *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965)¹, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003)², the courts have ruled largely in favor of policies which benefit big business through decisions such as *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*³.

While OWS has no official list of grievances, its central ideology is one of economic fairness. The imagery of a disproportionate distribution of wealth along with the concept that 'money=speech' became one of the main rallying cries of the movement. The rise of the '1%' even in the face of the worst recession since the Great Depression and the subsequent bailout by the government of banks which practiced irresponsible financial practices provides the base for most complaints of the OWS movement. This paper does not seek to validate or discredit these facts, only to recognize that they are the ideological base from which the complaints of

¹ A case where the Supreme Court struck down a State law prohibiting the use of contraceptives

² A case where the Supreme Court struck down a State law prohibiting homosexual acts

³ A Supreme Court decision that held which held that the first amendment prohibited the government from restricting independent political expenditures by corporations and unions.

OWS stem. These issues have been of growing concern in the United States for several decades, and the bailouts occurred in 2008-2009. This raises the question of why it took so long for a movement such as OWS to spark. It wasn't just internal conditions, such as the economic recession, that manifested the movement, but also inspiration and organization drawn from the flurry of other movements and protests popping up all over the globe.

As has already been mentioned, the Arab Spring had an enormous influence on the United States. It showed previously apathetic and scared young people standing up and taking to the streets for democracy and freedom. If the Tunisian street merchant Mohammed Bouazizi did not immolate himself in late 2010, OWS may have never well existed. Protesting abuse from a government official, his act set off a revolution in Tunisia, which eventually spread to almost all of North Africa and the Middle East. The period of late 2010-2012 was and is a period of intense protest and uprising in the world. Many protests and revolutions mimicked each other's tactics, such as utilizing social media technology like Facebook to organize and plan protests, as well to counter state misinformation. There was also a focus on non-violent protest, which eventually manifested itself in the occupation of public space. The use of modern communication technologies in organizing political protest in contemporary popular movements has a history dating back to Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Mitchell 1995, p.123). As the technology has improved, so has the possible level of organization. Personal internet ready communication devices such as smart phones have become popular in developing countries, making a state monopoly over information extremely difficult.⁴ In Egypt, tens of thousands of

⁴ According to one journalist, smartphones are set to be the fastest spreading technology in human history (Anthony 2012)

people descended onto Tahrir Square during a time arranged through Facebook, demanding the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. This protest set precedent for its successful use of social media to organize protest and disseminate information in real time to people with mobile devices. In Egypt and the US, this enabled protesters to outmaneuver the police. Another important element of these protests that were emulated by OWS was the concept of anonymous, horizontally structured leadership. The Arab Spring created a vast wave of media attention in the United States which organizers hoped would carry the momentum of OWS.

Beginning of OWS

OWS has roots in the hard left of the political spectrum. Many of its initial organizers were anarchists. (Schwartz 2011) The concept of OWS was created during the Summer of 2011 by the magazine *Adbusters*¹, an anti-capitalist publication.² It was inspired by the occupation at Tahrir Square in Egypt, and wanted to do something similar close to Wall Street to spread their message about corruption in the financial sector.³

New York was a logical place for the OWS movement to begin, and not just because it is home to Wall Street. According to a report by the Fiscal Policy Institute, New York has the highest income inequality among all states, and New York City the highest among all major American cities. The top 1% of New Yorkers account for 35% of the State's income, "including about 20 percent of all wages; 50 percent of dividends, interest and business income; and about 90 percent of all net realized capital gains." (Fiscal Policy Institute 2008)

By nightfall on September 17, 2011 over a thousand people were in Zucotti Park, despite the fact that this had not been the originally designated meeting place, which was Chase Manhattan Plaza, closer to Wall Street itself and the iconic bull statue. Having done their

homework the NYPD was waiting for protesters to come to Chase Manhattan Plaza early on September 17. Once the police dispersed the crowd, they likely suspected it to be the end of it. The protesters' ability to quickly change plans underneath the police's field of vision was a technique exercised and improved upon by the protesters of the Arab Spring, where mobilizing in response to police could sometimes be a life or death situation. This ability, along with the idea of literally occupying a public space with a large group of people was something that the NYPD and later police forces all over the US were not prepared for. The cat and mouse tactics game played between police and protesters would continue to create great tension, leading in some cases to violence. Outnumbered and without a sense of their usual control, the police naturally became more aggressive.

The movement quickly moved on its own towards the middle of the political spectrum as its numbers swelled, although the structure established by its radical-leftist beginnings remains unchanged. Working groups are the key to OWS' organization, and much of its success. Occupywallst.org lists ninety active working groups which have emerged from the New York City General Assembly (NYCGA), whose responsibilities range from taking photos, to accounting, to immigrant worker justice. Within these autonomous collectives, almost anyone can find a position which is suited to their skills or education. In an economy where even accountants and lawyers are having trouble finding jobs, working groups allow people to not only work for a political cause, but also utilize skills which aren't in great demand in an environment where they are largely their own boss. Many unemployed people went to OWS just to see what it was all about, and ended up staying because they felt that they were needed, a feeling that is rare and intoxicating for the young and unemployed. Many of the

people who have dedicated their lives to OWS did not begin with that intention. Yet hundreds have done so, primarily due to the horizontal yet organized structure which allowed them to use their brains, talents and labor to work towards something they really believed in.

This structure, especially the idea that every decision must be approved by a 90% consensus, attracted criticism and frustration from some of the protesters, especially organizers of more traditional social movements, who had never worked with horizontal organization on such a large scale. By early October, as the media increased the popularity (and population) of the movement, consensus was made difficult within a crowd “whose politics ranged from ‘Daily Show’ liberalism to insurrectionary anarchism”.⁴ (Schwartz 2011, p.4) While the original occupation in New York City garnered much of the spotlight, OWS is a national movement, and in order to properly contextualize it I found it necessary to carry out a regional analysis of the movements which emerged under the Occupy brand.

Methodology

In trying to get a grasp of the big picture of OWS, I started by reading every news article I could find, from local media to national newspapers. Not feeling satisfied that I was getting the whole story, in early December I began closely following the movements which were occurring in the forty most populous cities in the United States.⁵ I created a spreadsheet documenting when they had started and whether they were still going from information online. I found each movement’s Facebook page, website or blog if one was present, and performed a search on Google to search for news articles. I worked from an expectation that every OWS movement has an online presence, and that its level of activity could be determined via the Internet, which is how movements disseminate information to the group and advertise

themselves. If an occupation had been evicted from public space, I recorded when and why.⁶ I was looking for a correlation between population size and likelihood of an Occupy movement being present, but since 38 out of the 40 cities I looked at had movements present the results were inconclusive. I realized I had to increase the scope of my search and find every single OWS movement I could. Such work had already been done through websites which acted as directories for OWS, but I found that much of their information was unreliable under the scrutiny of online investigation.

I took the largest list I could find, which had over 1,000 listings, as a baseline to begin my search. I excluded movements which represented larger regions such as States and Counties, groups representing Universities, Occupy Movements existing outside of the United States and the innumerable Occupy organizations which exist solely on the online realm, such as OccupyMarines and OccupySEC⁷. I focused on finding movements claiming to represent cities within the US, which were much easier to distinguish and find. Another method widely used by small OWS movements was using so called “meetup” sites, where users can set up events within their cities that others can search for online. These pages were among the top results when searching for a movement using a search engine, although I did not consider them credible unless more than one person on the page commented on an event that had taken place. After analyzing hundreds of movements I determined that they fit into three categories: movements that were still active (activity found within the past month, with events planned for the future, See Figure 1), movements that were once active (no activity for at least a month, but were active for more than a month, See Figure 2) and actions which I labeled as “Solidarity

Protests”, which were movements that had one or two protests but did not remain active for more than a few weeks (See Figure 2). I plotted my results on a map, and found that the spatial

Figure 1: Active OWS Movements in Continental US as of May 1, 2012

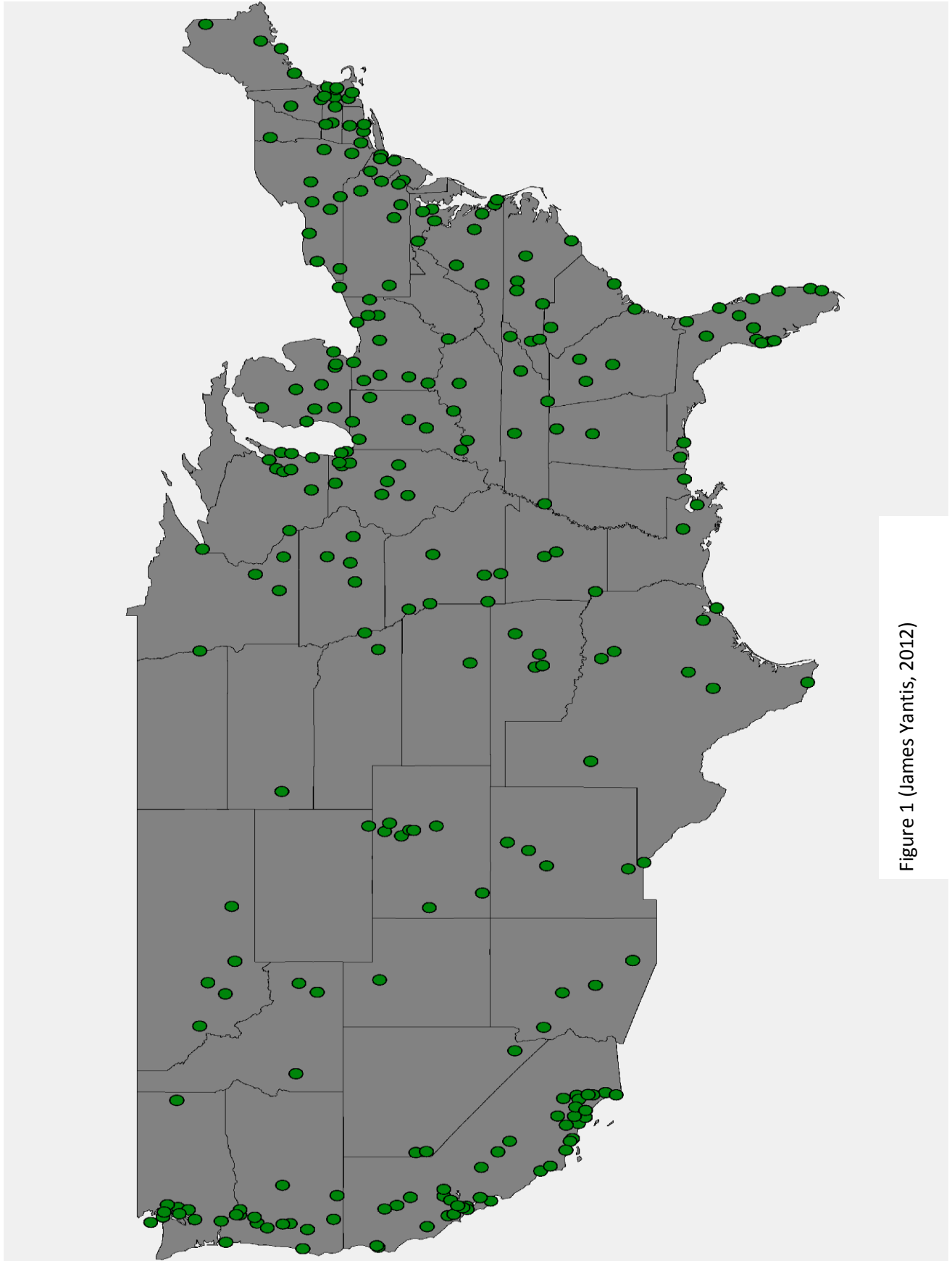


Figure 1 (James Yantis, 2012)

Figure 2: Once Active OWS Movements and Solidarity Protests in the Continental US

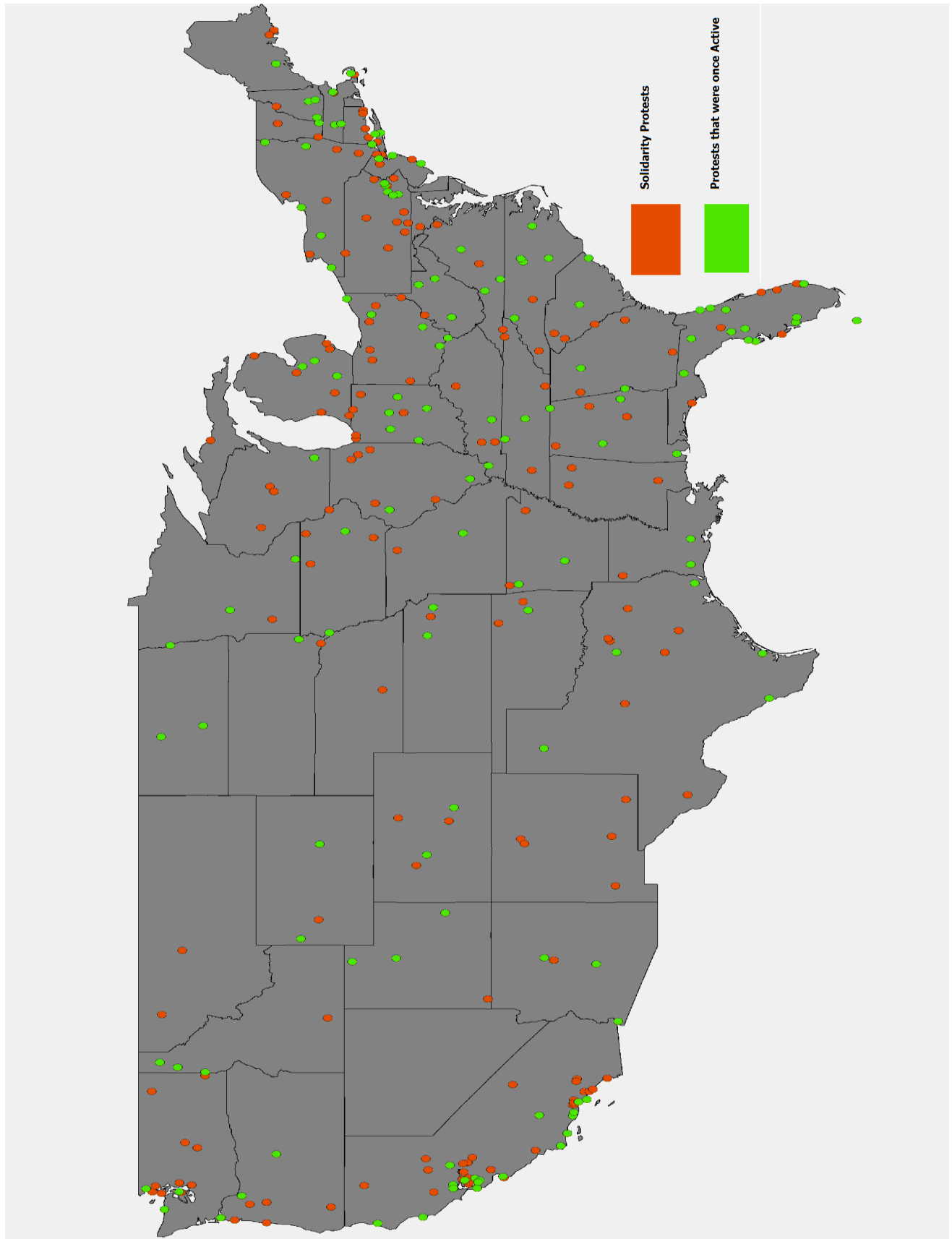


Figure 2 (James Yantis 2012)

pattern of the 576 movements I found were very closely correlated to the population distribution of the United States. The ability to track a popular movement like this is a recent phenomenon born out of the use of the Internet, in this case specifically Facebook. I believe that the correlation between population density and density of OWS movements strengthens the case that it is indeed a popular movement, and may provide some structure for defining popular movements in the future (See Figure 3).

While there is significantly less documentation of Occupy protests outside major cities and reliable information is much harder to find, they are collectively no less important. When looking at OWS movements throughout the country, the first question that needed to be answered was what exactly defines an OWS movement? I decided that the indicators of an active OWS movement are the presence of a regularly updated website or blog, and regularly scheduled general assemblies. Without these two presences, online and in the physical realm, an OWS movement cannot be said to be active. The date of creation of a movement is the moment when online planning moves into the form of direct action or protest. Figure 2 shows Occupy movements which I have found to be active as of May 1 2012, organizing protests and events through an active online base. As is shown, some of these have been continuously active since early fall 2011, and some were started much later, after the media spotlight had faded. While initially the hallmark of every Occupy movement was the actual occupation of a

public space, the movement on the whole has transcended beyond this tactic.

Figure 3: All Occupations and Population in the Continental US by County

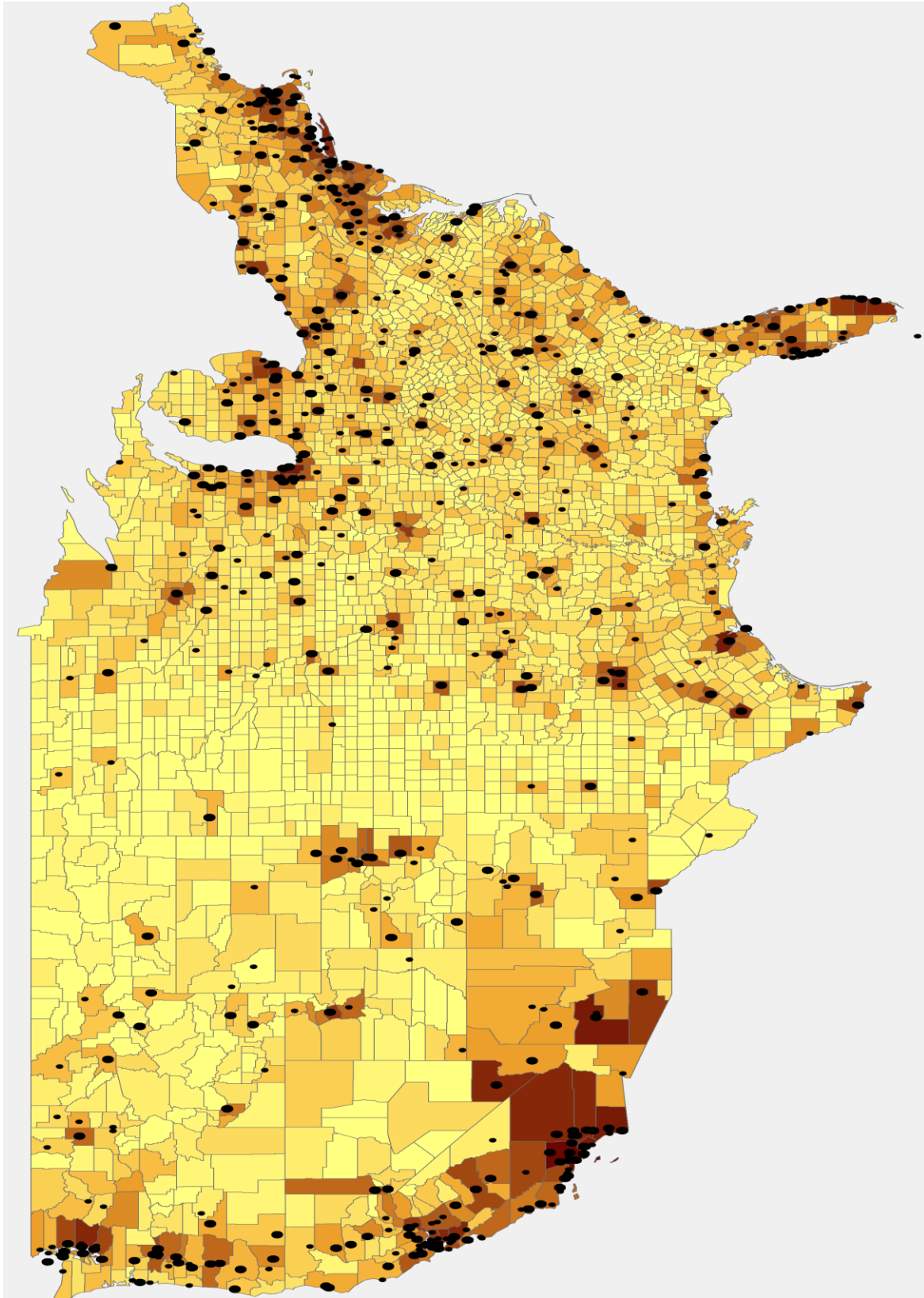


Figure 3 (James Yantis, 2012)

Determining how long an occupation lasted is a tricky exercise. In cases like New York, one sweeping raid by police was sufficient to permanently remove the tent city from Zucotti Park. There are other cases, however, where Occupiers endured several raids by police and persisted in returning, even if to another location. When smaller movements began, they were usually covered by the local media, establishing for many occupations a solid date which determined when they began protesting. By the time the media frenzy over the Occupy Movement died down in late November, eviction or disbanding of Occupy sites in smaller cities wasn't covered by the local media, making it difficult to determine when exactly they ended.

Regional Analysis

As was shown in countless cities, it only took a handful of people to form a movement that stood in solidarity with the original protest in New York City. Quickly after the movement spread across the country, key leaders emerged to organize collaboration and plan future events. Some stayed focused on their own local occupy movement, while others got more involved with the national OWS network which was forming. Even though protesters in small cities and towns received no attention or at best were the point of jokes among local media, by plugging into the online Occupy network of blogs, live streams and media sharing, protesters could still feel like they were part of an enormous transnational movement even if their occupation consisted of only a few people.

Small protests, especially in less densely populated areas of the US such as the Midwest, often consolidated with other Occupy sites in their county or state to form larger organizations. These protesters communicated online and transported members of their protests to other regional locations to swap ideas, and plan events. For example, this led to the creation of

organizations such as Occupy Wisconsin, Occupy Michigan, and on a larger scale “Occupy the Midwest”. East Coast cities, especially New York, drew people from surrounding areas such as Connecticut, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Unlike their counterparts in larger cities, smaller protests (not on the West Coast) had few connections and support from activist groups. The lack of an activist precedent meant that there were few people who knew how to manage a website, blog or Facebook page. In smaller Occupy communities, mastering social networking was a challenge if no one in the group had such expertise. There was also a much more open and accessible power structure in smaller occupations allowing more opportunity for headstrong individuals to shape the movement towards their own political ideals. While larger movements found strength in diversity, among a crowd of a dozen or less people it could lead to conflict and in some cases schisms, with one group disowning the other and claiming to be the “true” Occupy representative of their area.⁸

Zucotti Park in New York City was not a space that prior to OWS had seen much notable public use. In examining the spaces in which other occupations took place, this turned out to be a recurring theme. In an article regarding Dilworth Plaza in Philadelphia, former home to the now evicted OccupyPhilly movement, “Since the beginning of the Philadelphia Occupy Wall Street protests in October this is possibly the most Dilworth Plaza has ever been used in its 40 years.”⁹(Shapiro 2011) Freedom Plaza, home of OccupyDC, is a famous American landmark and tourist destination due to its proximity to Capitol Hill. However, “Freedom Plaza makes few concessions for human needs and can be a shimmering wasteland in summer or midwinter”, and “sacrifices the possibilities of building a strong sense of connectedness to the goals of elegance and monumentality and an abstract idea.”(Carr et. al, p.212) Most parks and plazas

that hosted Occupy movements around the country had no history of any culture at all, much less political action. The sudden, radical shift of these public spaces into sites of controversial political discourse sent a shockwave through the country which propelled OWS to infamy.

Public Space

The conflict regarding the role of public space is not new. In post-industrial cities, notions about public space have been increasingly dominated by “a planning and marketing ethos” (Mitchell 1995, p. 120). City planners and developers, taking a page out of the design of pseudo-public spaces such as malls, have sought to create spaces “that are based on desires for security rather than interaction, for entertainment rather than (perhaps divisive) politics.” and have “a perceived need for order, surveillance, and control over the behavior of the public.” (Mitchell 1995, p. 119) Today, one would not expect to be petitioned or confronted about political issues while at the mall, but in 1986 the New York Times noted that it was one of “the most significant free speech issues of the day” (*New York Times*, February 10, 1986, quoted in Carr et al. 1992 p. 153). As the marketing ethos became stronger, it became generally understood that constitutional free-speech guarantees did not apply to private property, even if it was partially funded by the public. Courts in the state of New York, among others, formally made this concept into law. (Carr et al. 1992 p.154)

After September 11, domestic security became an even higher priority, especially in dense urban spaces such as New York City. This translated into a further increase in surveillance and control of public spaces such as parks and plazas, as well as a more militarized police force.¹⁰ These changes went largely unnoticed by a public trying to recover from the worst domestic attack in United States history, which indirectly led the country into two concurrent

wars. Through OWS, the general public saw the tactics and equipment used by police forces around the country being shown and discussed in the media on a large scale for the first time post-9/11.

As Mitchell points out, “the American past was anything but inclusive—and public space was always a source of conflict.” (Mitchell 1995, p. 121) However, over the course of the latter part of the twentieth century political conflict in public space began to dwindle. This trend came about due to the burgeoning importance of communications technology in providing the primary arena for public expression. In 1995, Mitchell observed that “for many scholars...modern communications technology now provides the primary site for discursive public activity in general and politics in particular.” (Mitchell 1995, p. 122) Even earlier, in 1990, some emphasized that “the media today is the public sphere, and this is reason for the degradation of public life if not its disappearance” (Carpignano et al. 1990, p.33; emphasis in original, quoted in Mitchell 1995, p. 122). Fraser (1990) observed this reliance on the media as having dangerous implications for the health of American public space. Mitchell saw this migration of the public arena into the media as a progressive continuance of public space being regulated to suit the needs of those who wanted to control it for marketing purposes. “Interactive, discursive politics have been effectively banned from the gathering points of the city.” (Mitchell 1995, p.119) Scholars mentioning the “media” during this time were referring primarily to television and radio. The rise of the Internet marked a new, divergent path in the progression of electronic “public space”. As opposed to the arenas of TV and radio, in which the public ability to seek out or demand representation is heavily restricted by financial and regulatory barriers, the Internet allows each individual to contribute to the “global village” of

public sentiment on their own terms. Beginning with websites and online message boards, individuals could, at a fraction of the cost of owning a TV or radio show, broadcast their opinion to the world. While the Internet is largely accessed through private contracts with service providers, it began to appear in public spaces such as libraries for free through public computers. While still grossly underrepresented in the world of public cyberspace, even marginalized groups such as the homeless had access to this new form of individualistic expression. Perhaps the most important aspect of social media was that in many cases (such as Facebook) it replaced anonymous identities with real ones, which normalized the method of expression into one that more closely mimicked public, face to face interaction. Family, friends and acquaintances were now visibly occupying the Internet space. Social media was and continues to be dominated by younger generations, many of whom openly and publicly express their opinions on everything from their daily lives to politics. By the time OWS started happening, expression and representation through the Internet had become ubiquitous in the everyday lives of people of all ages.

The resurging need to reclaim and utilize public space came about in part from the feeling that the traditional media was failing in its duty to adequately express “public” opinion. Information technology has led to the transformation of social space which “no longer coincides either with the traditional forms of organization of solidarity or with the conventional channels of political representation.” (Melucci 1995 p.3) As more people were expressing their opinions online, the disparity between the “public space” image by “new media” (blogs, social networks, etc.) and that of traditional media became apparent. While the Internet was becoming more individualistic, differing voices in traditional media were shrinking. By 2011,

much of the TV, Newspaper and Radio media had been consolidated into the hands of a few mega-corporations. This corporate takeover of traditional media laid the foundation for the rise of an anti-media movement, a cause which fit naturally with OWS' condemnation of corporate influence.

OWS' occupation of public space was meant to symbolize a retaking of public opinion from those who sought to formulate public discourse along their own terms. This meant directly challenging the communicative mediums which traditionally expressed public sentiment such as television and radio to not only identify OWS's message, but to ultimately condone or dismiss it. The protesters sought to change the nature of "public space" to work for the good of the "public interest". The more disparity between their political views and those of the "public", the less legitimacy their claim had. Here is where the role of new media played its most crucial role in the early development of the movement; while traditional media initially largely ignored the protests, news of the occupation and its message exploded on social networks and blogs. In less than three weeks, OWS spurred the creation of more than 200 unique Facebook and Twitter accounts and 10,000 videos on Youtube. On a given day in early October, 10,000 to 15,000 posts about OWS were being produced on Twitter *every hour*.

(Preston 2011)

OWS' existence is proof that there has been a dormant presence of what Fraser (1990, p.56-80) describes as a "counter-public" movement brewing in the United States for a long time. Within weeks newspapers, journals, lectures, conventions, local meeting places, and documentaries were established all under the cultural umbrella of "Occupy Wall Street". These kinds of networks developed for other counter-public movements such as those of feminists

and LGBT groups over the course of decades, not days. The official homegrown newspaper, titled the "*Occupy Wall Street Journal*", initially set out to raise \$12,000 to begin printing issues. It quickly gathered more than \$75,000, allowing it to publish 70,000 copies of its very first issue, complete with promotional assistance from filmmaker and social critic Michael Moore. (Carr 2011)

OWS successfully disseminated the message into the public sphere that problems of the economy were the concern of not just the banks, or the government, but of the public at large, the so called "99%". The principle argument levied against OWS, the question of "what should be done about it?" outlines perhaps why issues such as income inequality and private influence in politics weren't issues of common concern in the first place; nobody had any real, applicable solutions. However, under circumstances of severe inequality and disenfranchisement, the need to *say* something, even if nobody knows what can be done about it, ignited a populist movement. If the solution is clear and within reason, then it can be pursued by means within the current channels of political action available to the public, such as petitions, contacting the media, and appealing to politicians. When a particular trigger event lays bare the failure of the available channels to induce needed change, public confidence in the ability of the system to fix itself declines, and populist pressure begins to build. Therefore, populist movements can be viewed as warning signs that a political or economic system is disenfranchising a segment of the population. The size and scope of OWS could then be viewed as evidence that the channels of representation in the United States are failing, like a metaphorical canary in the coal mine.

Public Identities

Activism has long been popular in the United States, but activists have always helped form identities that were very much foreign to the public at large. Career activists typically had their identities dominated by their activism. OWS initially allowed people to identify with the movement's counter-public ideas and actions, while still allowing space for their own unique perspectives to dominate. Under the guise of being among the "99%", one could appear sympathetic to the issues OWS raised while still fundamentally disagreeing with their actions or methods.

Perhaps the most controversial and offensive aspect of "occupation" to American society at large is how it blurs the line between the "public" and the "private", two spheres which Americans feel more comfortable explicitly defining and keeping separate.¹¹ From this clash came perhaps the most effective critiques of "occupation"; that it was directly responsible for people practicing hygiene (or preventing them from doing it), sleeping, going to the bathroom, and fornicating in public. Taking drugs, while not condoned, has also been sternly delegated to the private realm. While not as harshly judged, cooking and making music are also actions that people feel more comfortable seeing in the appropriate context. The most extreme offending acts of this privacy taboo, including going to the bathroom and fornication, are also the ones that attract the most attention from the media. The media then helps create a distorted view that these actions are pervasive within occupations, when they are in reality the unfortunate actions of just a few individuals. In New York, a photo was captured of a man defecating on a police car, which then went viral in the media. One photo of a couple sharing a sleeping bag suggests scandal, especially in the minds of the socially conservative. The very

concept of occupation raises questions, such as where *do* they go to the bathroom exactly? Where *do* they shower? Up until the very end of most occupations around the country, hygiene continued to be the most levied criticism, one that was so powerful that it overpowered OWS' political reasons for occupying.

Along with hygiene, there were other issues regarding the management of public space that the Occupiers found themselves forced to address. One was the risk of sexual assault, especially against women. Carr notes that "despite the rhetoric of change, women continue to feel vulnerable in the public setting and, indeed, their fears are supported by statistics on victimization." (Carr et. al, p.155) There were dozens of cases of reported sexual misconduct at Occupy sites around the country. Organizers responded in some sites by setting up female-only sleeping areas. While Carr emphasizes that these experiences often deter females from enthusiastically utilizing public space, there is no evidence that this had any impact on women's participation in OWS. Nevertheless, this issue, along with the harshly negative media attention that it brings, is an ever-present danger of large crowds occupying public space.

In the process of using public space as a political arena, OWS exposed the high levels of homelessness and racialized poverty which predominates much of urbanity in the United States today. Homeless people don't fit into the modern city's definition of what comprises the "acceptable" public, and in categorizing them as such "their legitimacy as members of the public is put in doubt." (Mitchell 1995, p.118) This was not a war that most Occupy activists had signed up to fight. They themselves were scratching their heads and trying to work out how to handle the influx of homeless people, drugs and crime which inevitably come with crowded public spaces. Many homeless people are mentally unstable, and some find the presence of the

Occupiers an annoying disruption of their daily routine. The parks, which previously represented a place where they could find some resemblance of privacy, were transformed into crowded centers of attention. For the most part, homeless who are of sound mind have lived cooperatively with the protesters, and some have become involved by participating in General Assemblies.

Other elements of the occupation brought to light some forgotten benefits of a truly diverse, public space. According to urban geographers, "Restrictive management of large parks has created an increasingly inhospitable environment for immigrants, local ethnic groups, and culturally diverse behaviors." (Low, et. al, 2005, p.4) These researchers are seeing an increase of "vernacularization and homogeneity" in urban environments within the United States, leading to the creation of ethnic enclaves. They argue that public space, such as parks, are among the last bastions of true multicultural and diverse public interaction. Occupy locations quickly became the most diverse spaces in many cities, bringing in people of all classes, ages and ethnicities. In New York City, a working group encouraged protesters to bring their children to stay the night in the park. Children of upper-middle class white families were sleeping outside just yards away from homeless people. When I observed Zucotti Park on October 15, 2011, I noticed that everyone in the park appeared to be a minority, in the sense that no single ethnic or age group dominated the plaza. Many of the older protesters had been activists since Vietnam, while others had come out of despair at being unemployed. Union workers, from plumbers to firefighters, had a large presence. The air was thick with foreign accents and languages, many the voices of disillusioned immigrants who hadn't found the American Dream they expected. Along with police uniforms, one could find those of street performers,

clergymen and even the military. The incredible convergence of diversity was just another way that OWS challenged conventions about public space.

The tents, resource stations and open space which comprised Zucotti Park led to the formation of organically constructed districts and corridors. It allowed people in the Plaza a sense of anonymity in walking through and observing, as well as a sense of intimacy if they desired to situate themselves in a nook and participate in close communication with another person or small group.

Public eviction

Public space has been used to create an image of what the public *should* look like, rather than what it actually is. Public diversity has been turned into an artificially created concept, designed to make the desired public (middle class, tourists) comfortable. The discourse has shifted from “public space” to “open space”, which is *open* to the public but not *defined* by it. The ambiguous nature of what is “appropriate” raises important questions. Who determines what is “appropriate”? As mentioned earlier, the Occupy movement believed that it was redefining the nature of public space to match public sentiment. In New York, the city administration claimed that it was its obligation to make sure the public space was clear of criminal activities, safe and usable for the general public. This conflict brought into question just who the “representative” users of this space were supposed to be. Zucotti Park is not a park at all but a corporate-sponsored plaza. It is completely paved, with no designated space for recreational activities. It embodies Carr’s observation that “many public places have been designed to be uncomfortable, to encourage people to look at or move through space rather than use it.” (Carr et. al, 1992, p. 154) At 33,000 sq. feet, Zucotti Park is barely half the size of a

football field. The city insisted that the encampment needed to be cleaned *of* the public, *for* the public. The movement in Zucotti Park, believing these reasons were contrived, made it a point to address them. After an announcement on October 12 by Mayor Bloomberg that the park would have to be cleared on Friday, October 14 for a “cleaning”, the movement responded by spending the next two days scrubbing the park from top to bottom. A new symbol of the movement became a “power fist” grasping a broom. With the pretense seemingly stripped of its legitimacy, thousands came to the park at around 5:00 AM October 16, forming a human barricade between the park and police who were fully clad in riot gear. This defense worked, and police backed down. This was a clear message by thousands of the “public” to the City of New York; they didn’t have hegemony over what was considered appropriate or acceptable to the general public. I was at Zucotti Park on October 15, and witnessed this barricade for myself. Regardless of their feelings about OWS, the general public could see right through Mayor Bloomberg’s poor excuse. The City would never again attempt to clear the park by trying to appeal to the public’s sense of what was “acceptable”. Doing so only strengthened the Occupiers sense of legitimacy.

If the occupation of public space suggests an alignment with public interest, then it also suggests that this works backwards; the loss of the public space signifies a lack of alignment with public opinion. Leaving the space could be seen as akin symbolically to the movement leaving the social, cultural space it had created. This made it possible for the movement to be defeated by something as rudimentary as unpleasant weather. However, the image of the public space being turned into a semi-militarized zone, complete with barricades and heavily armed police, symbolized that the space was being pressured by foreign elements outside the

public arena. Even as OWS was planning its winter hiatus of occupation, in mid-November, city officials across the country, almost in unison, decided to take action. By the end of November, most occupations in the US would be gone.

The establishment's preemptive action, not just in the actual eviction but in the militarization of the space, removed the public's ability to determine for itself the rules regarding the appropriate use of "public space" with the emergence of the "occupation" mentality. In the end, this worked against not only its own interest but that of the public as well. From the beginning, the occupation in Zucotti Park was under pressure from surrounding small businesses and residents whose everyday lives were being interrupted by the noise and crowds. It was inevitable that either OWS would have to modify its activities, or public sentiment would drive them from the park. It is a movement that requires legitimacy in the eye of the public, but not the government. On the contrary, from the beginning stern official attention to its activities was seen by protesters as a legitimization of their work. In many ways, the excessive response by city governments justified the occupations in the public eye as well, and drew more people to the sites. This began a series of escalations between police and protesters which culminated in widespread reports of brutality and violence. Outside of New York City, where on average Occupy sites were much less militarized spaces, the negative effects of "occupation" became evident; over time it drew in unsustainable numbers of homeless people, and maintenance of safe levels of hygiene became too much work for protesters to handle. However, the occupation, and remaking, of a space into a non-violent politicized arena was a success; by the time the encampments were cleared out the statement the protesters wanted to make had been made. Protests naturally moved to the occupation

and politicization of other places, such as foreclosed homes, banks and government meetings. In places like Milwaukee, protesters and city government planned and worked together every step of the way to ensure the space remained acceptable to both parties, strengthening the civil bond between citizen and government. This happened largely because such occupations included the police and city governments in their planning process from the beginning. OWS isn't and never has been a protest ideologically aimed at local police or government, even though they seemed to be diametrically opposed in cities such as New York and Oakland.

In New York City, the aggressive police stance against occupation, especially in the still heavily monitored Zucotti Park, ensures that this form of protest will remain an enticing option for protesters trying to attract attention there, threatening to stunt the movement's evolution into other methods of direct action. In their increasing militarization and lack of concern regarding legitimacy, the NYPD has made itself the symbol of oppression, and in the eyes of protesters, the personal army of the financial elite. As a result, violent confrontations and arrests are sure to continue in New York as spring begins and protests regain energy. Indeed, at the six month anniversary of the OWS movement, seventy-three people were arrested when they marched on Zucotti Park and appeared to be setting up tents. Every arrest of a non-violent protester under the visage of "occupying" creates a martyr that will only escalate confrontation between the public and the City of New York. Unfortunately, the city and NYPD have arrested themselves into a corner, and it is unlikely that they will moderate their level of intensity at this point. As protesters around the country evolve new methods of direct action that relate to the core purpose of OWS, New York City will likely be stuck in a loop of confrontation revolving

around citizens and paramilitarized police forces, fueled not only by reciprocating escalation but also the sensationalizing by the media which will surely follow.

Given the observations and theorizations by Mitchell (1995) and Fraser (1990) about the decline of American public life, the strong reactions to OWS shouldn't come as much of a surprise. Whether OWS will jumpstart a renaissance of utilizing public space for political action across the United States, or these events will be an outlier in the history of these public spaces remains to be seen.

Concluding Remarks

OWS started out as an organized event, spread virally across the United States, and then emerged as a movement organized by key actors regionally. One could view it as part of a continuing experiment in new methods of diffusion of populist sentiment and how Internet popularity can be transformed into tangible action.

OWS was, and is, a crucial stepping stone for the fight against economic and social inequality in the United States. It has brought these issues to the forefront of public conversation, in homes, media and politics. It has trained, informed and inspired countless young people, as well as adults, to continue this fight in the future. If socio-economic conditions do not improve, large trigger events will spark new popular movements, as has been described through the theorizations of sociologists Melucci and Touraine. Now that OWS' message about inequality has entered into the national conversation, it is likely to stay there for the foreseeable future, and play a large role in the 2012 US election cycle.

While the rhetoric of OWS has been firmly entrenched into the national conversation, the organization itself is likely to deteriorate in importance. "Occupy Wall Street" is a brand,

and similar to a clothing brand people who wear it can claim to represent it, but there is no set definition of what they are representing exactly. With no leadership, anyone can claim to be representing the OWS brand. In a leaderless movement like OWS, it takes a lot of people working together to improve the brand's reputation, and only one person doing something negative to decrease it. To organize a march or a protest which garners positive attention, it takes hundreds of people organizing and working together, while it only takes one person to do something which brings negative attention (such as defecating on a police car in front of a camera). This has led to fragmentation within the movement, with some participants separating themselves (and "their" brand) from less attractive elements.¹² Fragmentation takes the movement away from being a popular movement and towards being a more traditionally organized social movement. While this isn't inherently a bad thing, it does severely limit its ability to regain the populist fervor that its all-inclusive organization achieved. Another limiting factor on the OWS' popularity is its divergence from the strategy of occupation. The media attention OWS garnered from its occupation of public space is unlikely to be replicated by any of its future actions. Debates sparked about proper police behavior and proper use of public space propelled OWS to such a level of fame that it dominated the public discourse solidly from October 2011 to the end of November of that year. In some ways, OWS past fame is now its worst enemy. OWS' message must now fight with the stigmatization by the media over its confrontations with police, its leadership structure and its lack of a revolutionary agenda.

For a popular movement such as OWS, effectiveness can be measured in popularity, because any tangible effect it has on politics, culture or the economy is often indirect. For example, the public conversation OWS helped start about income inequality inspired support

for the “Buffet Rule” which raises taxes on the wealthiest Americans, and pushed President Barack Obama to acknowledge it as “the defining issue of our time.”(Eichler 2012) OWS has set a strong precedent for popular movements of the future that advocate non-partisan, reformatory change without violence, and even if it fades away the shockwaves of its existence will be felt for years to come.

¹ Micah White, who works for *Adbusters* and came up with the name “Occupy Wall Street”, wrote to a collaborator on August 2nd that his main goal was “*getting the meme out there...we are not trying to control what happens.*” The idea of memes originated from Richard Dawkins, and took on a new importance with the rise of Internet culture. The concept is that if a meme can resonate with enough people, it can take on a life of its own and spread. In this case the meme was “Occupy Wall Street”, and it caught on. Three days after the initial occupation, on September 20th, Micah White sent a draft of a list of demands by the people of Liberty Plaza, which included forming a Presidential Commission to investigate Wall St. corruption, to the organizers on the ground at Zucotti Park. The response? “*This is a wonderful draft. However, the General Assembly is going through the process of drafting a statement. It should be read this afternoon.*” In place of the *Adbuster’s* manufactured manifesto, a “Declaration of the Occupation” was created through the General Assembly, which listed no clear demands at all. (*The New Yorker* Nov. 2011)The original idea was to create a movement that dictated its own path, that had no sponsors, and almost immediately after the occupation of Zucotti Park began, this is exactly what was happening. The autonomous, collective phenomenon which would soon rock the United States had begun.

² OccupyWallSt.org itself was founded by a group who refers to themselves as “Trans World Order”, comprised of transgender anarchists. (Schwartz 2011)

³ It was not alone in its idea to mimic the Occupy strategy to get a political message across. “Bloombergville”, an anti-austerity protest organized by New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts, was holding general assembly type meetings in June, and chose encampment as its method of direct action. While in the planning stages, the group was contacted by *Adbusters* and shifted its gears towards collaboration for September 17th,

2011. When the event it had already half-planned on August 2nd occurred in Manhattan, the group of mostly anarchists who gathered there sat down and began organizing what would later be the core structure of OWS; a horizontal organizational structure which reached decisions by group consensus, and the use of hand signals to display opinion, methods that stretch back to the civil-rights movement and earlier. (Schwartz 2011)

⁴ This conflict would lead to schisms within the Occupy Movement in New York. Many activists believed that the best thing for the movement was to move as far as possible away from any anarchistic elements. In Zucotti Park, over time people began separating into two different camps. At one end were those who were largely educated, middle and upper class young white people who had strong ideas about which direction the movement should take, principally towards increased organization. While they still supported the leaderless structure of the movement, these people had a greater focus on organizing working groups, and empowering members of the movement who showed initiative and leadership to exercise those skills. They were also much more focused on being “media friendly”, believing that portraying a positive image to the media was an important part of the movement. The “other” camp so to speak was comprised of the lower classes, including homeless, and had much more ethnic variety. Opinions in this camp tended to be much more radically left, more in line with the anarchistic roots of the movement. Despite this unintentional geographical splitting of the Occupy Space, resources were distributed evenly, and there remained only one General Assembly. However, separate meetings among the “upper echelon” protesters and working groups were held in nearby cafes and Wi-Fi hotspots. This would be a trend for Occupy Movements around the country.

⁵ Out of the top forty most populous cities in the United States, six (NYC, Chicago, Denver, Boston, San Francisco and Kansas City) had Occupy movements occupying public space before the end of September, when media was still not heavily covering the story. Twenty two of them saw the creation of an Occupy movement in public space within the first week of October, nine had Occupy movements by the second week of October, and Jacksonville did not see its Occupy movement begin until November 5. Out of the forty most populous cities, only Mesa, AZ and Virginia Beach, VA did not have Occupy movements take root.

⁶ No other occupation saw more constant harassment by police as Occupy Denver. Three raids completely cleared the camps, and several minor raids resulted in large structures being destroyed. In addition, Occupy Denver endured rough conditions, with temperatures dropping as low as 10 Fahrenheit in November. The first raid drove them from their original location in Lincoln Park, to another location close by, Civic Center Park. Both are in proximity to the State capitol building. Denver saw raids in 2011 on October 14, October 29, November 20 and finally December 20. These failed attempts by police were initiated as a response to large, potentially disruptive planned events by the Occupiers. Police likely thought that they could nip these demonstrations in the bud by raiding the camps the day before. October 14 was the day before a nationally planned day of action, (October 15 being the 10th anniversary of the war in Afghanistan) which saw every Occupy site in the country demonstrating in solidarity. This strategy by the police largely backfired; the raid served to actually energize the protesters, and brought more people out the next day. More people came not only because they wanted to show support for the movement in the face of police coercion, but also because it was a spectacle. This was certainly a learning experience for police around the country, who were trying to understand how to best clear out the protesters. If authorities had paid attention to events in Egypt, they would have seen this coming. The strategy later used by most police forces around the country was to strike on a non-significant day, usually in the middle of the night, which was much more successful.

⁷ Occupy the SEC is a group which supports the proposed “Volcker Rule”, a legislation which limits the kind of investing that banks can partake in. They submitted a 325 page letter to the SEC, FDIC, the Federal Reserve and the OCC commenting on the notice of proposed rulemaking for the “Volcker Rule”.

⁸ One example of such a development was seen with Occupy Las Vegas (OLV). OLV touted a harmonious relationship with police and city officials, evidenced by them suspending the occupation during an Obama visit, because police asked them to. This cooperation is different from other movements, who have generally despised police interference of any kind. Occupy Las Vegas was one of the few movements in a major city that went through proper channels for everything and has not had one arrest or complaint from civil government. They forwarded all their plans to police a week in advance, and the police made edits and suggestions. Instead of occupying public space without permission, OLV Occupied an empty parking lot suggested by city officials, but not before obtaining proper insurance. All this led to the creation of a "F*** OLV" group on Facebook that denied that "OLV" was an occupy movement at all. This led to the formation of a more radical splinter group, "Occupy LV". Many members of this group became frustrated with the non-confrontational policies of Occupy Las Vegas and some were even banned from the grounds. This group of a few dozen met at UNLV, but never successfully set up their own encampment in Las Vegas.

⁹ The plaza was in the process of choosing contracts for its redesign as OWS was happening. It chose a contract on November 16, and Occupy Philly was pressured and eventually ousted on November 30 under the pretense that it had to be cleared for construction. It had previously been known as a harbor for homeless people.

¹⁰ Americans had witnessed scenes of police brutality before, including one notable "police" riot in Tompkins Square Park in New York City in 1988. However, after 9/11 and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, police equipment and tactics were revamped in response to domestic terrorism.

¹¹ In the discipline of Human Geography, it has long been established that the distinction between public and private space is artificial, that all space has elements of both public and private ideals. These concepts are fluid and contextual, not fixed. (Landes 2003, Wright 2010)

¹² Occupy made headlines in Portland when several squatters were arrested. They were apparently planning to target the houses of an elderly woman, thinking she wouldn't be savvy enough to realize they were there. Why was Occupy in the headlines? Police found "Occupy Literature" in their possession, along with anarchist literature. Without the facts, one can only assume what this literature was. It could've been anything, from a newsletter to a flier. Despite such a flimsy connection to the actual movement, the message to the public is clear; these are people who wear the Occupy brand.

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