From Protest Marches to City Squares and Parks:

The Fight for Urban Commons under Neoliberalism

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Over the past few years, we have witnessed the emergence of several social struggles that have reclaimed public spaces in a highly visible manner. Three of these struggles in particular, have attracted worldwide attention and interest, namely the Arab Spring, the Spanish *Indignados*, and Occupy Wall Street (OWS). This paper will argue that these movements have succeeded in capturing our imagination because they have demanded that we rethink the very meaning of the global commons in the aftermath of decades of neoliberal policies unleashed at the national and supranational levels. In fact, at the heart of each of the aforementioned struggles is a grassroots resistance to what amounts to a global enclosure movement—a regime of privatization, commodification, dispossession and disciplinary measures—which has deprived people of their right to the city.[2] Historically, public spaces are the place of assembly and politics. As such they are at the heart of any truly democratic society; and, increasingly, they are threatened by neoliberal governance. This is precisely why it is the *form* as much as the content of these recent waves of protest that is provoking debate, reaction and, oftentimes, state repression. From Tahrir Square and Puerta del Sol to Zuccotti Park and Taksim Square, reclaiming spaces is about the way we do politics. Challenging state control over urban spaces represents a powerful move to resist the alarming global trend toward dispossession.

Interestingly, while the intensity and scope of these mobilizations have led numerous scholars to speak of a resurgence of social struggles,[3] little emphasis has been placed on examining the

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[2] David Harvey uses the notion of right to the city to designate citizens' claims to have a say over how the urban environment in which they live is transformed. See "The Right to the City", *New Left Review* 53 (September-October 2008), in which Harvey points out the many ways by which the primacy of private property and of the search for profit under neoliberalism trump this right. He offers examples of how urban centers, from New York to Mexico City, are being reshaped along lines favourable to rich developers and a small political and economic elite.

[3] Michel Wieviorka, for instance, speaks of the contemporary conjuncture as "a period of renovation of social, political and cultural protest". See "The Resurgence of Social Movements", *Journal of Conflictology* 3, no. 2 (2012): 18.

specificities of these movements in terms of their spatial character and strategic reclamation of space. With a few notable exceptions,[4] commentators have indeed overlooked the renewed centrality of territory and place-based politics in these mobilizations. Rather, they have generally made sense of the efficacy and popularity of these recent protest movements through recourse to a kind of technological determinism that remains fixated upon the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in social movements. Beyond this technological determinism and the broader journalistic depictions of 'Facebook revolutions', critical analytical tools are needed to theorize the tendencies at work in recent struggles, particularly the Arab Spring, the Spanish *Indignados*, and Occupy Wall Street. This article aims to contribute to such a scholarly project by offering a framework of analysis for understanding the deeper logic at work in these movements, arguing that we see them as reappropriations of space in the face of dispossessions associated with neoliberal accumulation strategies. Upon closer examination, these waves of protest point towards a shift in the mode of action of contemporary social struggles, insofar as these struggles appear to favour the physical reappropriation of urban public spaces over the means of action privileged by the global justice movement over the past two decades—primarily, but not exclusively, protest marches and social forums. To better understand why such a shift is occurring, it is imperative that we relate the struggle to reappropriate public spaces to a much larger historical trend: the process of the enclosure of the commons that has been at the heart of capitalism since its inception.

As much research has shown, capitalism, as it first emerged in the English countryside in the late fifteenth century, brought with it the mass and enforced dispossession of peasants from the land by the aristocracy through a process known as the 'enclosure' movement.[5] This enclosure accelerated rapidly in the eighteenth century due to the active involvement of the British Parliament before spreading to the rest of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This spread of enclosures consisted of a complex and protracted process of diffusion involving imperialism and socio-economic pressures from the world market.[6] The importance of this process for making sense of current struggles lies in the fact that the enclosures, so central to capitalism, are not a completed and conclusive historical process, but one that is *ongoing*, continuing to extend into new and deeper reaches of life. The enclosure movement is one of dispossession which not only closes off physical spaces, barring access to land and resources, but also contributes to the disappearance of common and customary use—rights upon which many people depend for their livelihood.[7] It involves the commodification and privatization of the very means of social reproduction. The imposition of neoliberal policies throughout much of the world since the late 1970s has deepened enclosures through budgetary cuts, privatization of public services, market deregulation and trade liberalization.[8] The disciplinary measures adopted by governments to cope with the financial crisis of 2007-2008 have further intensified this process, not only by aggravating economic precariousness

[4] For instance, Sam Halvorsen, "Beyond the Network? Occupy London and the Global Movement", *Social Movement Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2012).

[5] Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe", *Past and Present* 70, (1976); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View* (Verso, 2002).

[6] For diverging viewpoints on the issue, see *inter alias* Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Empire of Capital* (Verso, 2005); ed. Alexander Anivas, *Marxism and World Politics: Contesting Global Capitalism* (Routledge, 2010); Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism* (Verso 2012); Neil Smith, "The Restructuring of Spatial Scale and the New Global Geography of Uneven Development", *Jinbun Chiri* 28 (2000).

[7] Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*: 108.

[8] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

among   workers   and   the unemployed—generating discontent on a massive scale—but also by reinforcing the closure of both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics.

In this regard, the recent waves of protest that are of interest here cannot be understood uniquely as the reaction of some of the political and economically disenfranchised—especially the unemployed youth—to the absence of economic and employment opportunities. They must be conceptualized as a much deeper response to the pressures of dispossession of the commons which are increasingly being felt worldwide. Beyond economic precariousness, the ideological and spatial 'closing up' of politics—of the ability of the people to participate in decision making processes and to be heard—is one of the central reasons why protestors have taken city squares and parks across the world by storm. As they have been dispossessed from non-market means to access their subsistence as well as from the ability to choose the organization of their communities, many people are searching to re-empower themselves in new ways, more specifically through occupying one of the few remaining commons: urban public spaces. Hence the place-based and embodied character of recent protests, which brings the principles of inclusiveness and democracy back to shared social spaces.

Long-Standing Struggles against Neoliberalism

The 1980s are recalled as a particularly difficult decade for labour movements in countries such as Britain and the United States. Repeated assaults on the part of right-wing administrations inflicted severe losses on some of the largest unions, while simultaneously subjecting social programs to budget cuts and undermining the postwar social-democratic welfare state.[9] Furthermore, in many countries of the Global South the debt crisis was used as a pretext by international institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to impose harsh measures of austerity, privatization and liberalization. These reforms have had enduring consequences both for the way in which states and markets interact and, as scholars working within the tradition of Feminist Political Economy have analyzed and documented, for the social reproduction of daily and generational life.[10]

Local practices of resistance to neoliberal measures have never ceased, but it was essentially in the wake of the indigenous Zapatista uprising in Chiapas on January 1, 1994—the date that the North-American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect—that the world witnessed the globalization of the struggles against neoliberalism. By the end of the decade, what came to be known as the 'global justice movement' had made a spectacular entrance into the media spotlight with a massive demonstration directed against the opening of a new round of negotiations of the

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[9] Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
[10] Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill, *Power, Production and Social Reproduction: Human In/security in the Global Political Economy* (London and New York: Macmillan-Palgrave, 2003); ed. Bezanson and Luxton, *Social Reproduction: Feminist Political Economy Challenges Neo-Liberalism* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006); Richa Nagar, "Locating Globalization: Feminist (Re)readings of the Subjects and Spaces of Globalization", *Economic Geography* 78, no. 3, (2002): 257-284.

World Trade Organization in Seattle. Increasingly aware of the speed with which the public could be warned of the lack of transparency and legitimacy of these negotiations in the age of the Internet, activists subsequently embarked upon a series of major protests parallel to official summit meetings between heads of states and governments. Protests drew tens of thousands of people in opposition to neoliberalism in Washington DC (2000), Prague (2000), Nice (2000), Gothenburg (2001), Quebec City (2001), and Genoa (2001).

While the immediate aims of these protests were to disturb international economic summits and denounce the set of policy propositions that they promote, the idea that social movements too could have their own international summits to discuss alternatives soon emerged. Following the initiative of Brazilian social organizations and activists, the first World Social Forum (WSF) was held in January, 2001, as an alternative to the annual World Economic Forum held in Davos. Since then, the WSF has been an annual or biennial forum, attended by activists around the world in order to discuss issues such as patriarchy, capitalism, ecology and imperialism. In 2005, at the peak of its popularity, 155,000 people attended the event in Porto Alegre. To date, social forums at the local, regional and global levels continue to be held all around the world. More than 30,000 participants recently gathered in Tunis for the 2013 WSF, and the organization of the third US Social Forum, the People's Social Forum in Canada and the WSF on Migration in South Africa (to name only a few) are all well under way.

The success of social forums as a space for debate on the fringes of traditional representative institutions should not overshadow the loss of steam experienced by street protests during the same period. While anti-war protests preceding the 2003 invasion of Iraq mobilized millions of people across the world, rarely have anti-globalization protests after 2001 reached the same magnitude as the protests that followed Seattle at the turn of the millennium. Scholars have pointed out that the events of 9/11 have had a long-lasting impact upon the ability of social movements to confront the state in the streets, as the fight against terrorism offered a powerful pretext to justify colossal public investments in police and intelligence agencies and instil a culture of fear around dissent in the United States and beyond.[11] As global justice activists were physically driven out of city streets by police lockdowns, the multiplication of social forums offered new spaces where it was possible to criticize neoliberalism and other forms of oppression without the threat of police brutality.

Thus, under the pressure of state repression, social forums broke away from the kind of direct confrontations with the state that had characterized the earlier manifestations of the social justice movement. This facilitated the rising hegemony of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which possess greater resources and institutional capacities, including links with governments and corporations, over grassroots social movements. Since then, critiques of the bureaucratization and corporatization, as well as the inaccessibility of the WSF have been voiced by community groups that promote more openly rebellious or insurrectionary actions, but lack the same means as big NGOs. Anarchists, for instance, have long criticized the WSF, for being supported by so-called "progressive" capitalist entrepreneurs and carrying out the project of a humanitarian capitalist

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[11] Nancy Chang, *Silencing Political Dissent: How Post-September 11 Anti-Terrorism Measures Threaten Our Civil Liberties* (Seven Stories Press, 2002); Judith Butler, "Explanation or Exoneration, or What we can Hear", *Grey Room*, no. 7 (2002): 56-67; James Der Derian, "9/11 and its Consequences for the Discipline", *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 11, no.1, 2004.

management.[12] Occupiers today are formulating a similar critique, recalling for instance that the 2007 WSF in Nairobi "was located far outside the city, and the gates were guarded with military force. [...] [T]he cost for entry was too high for most Kenyans to afford, and the fees for vendors precluded local businesses while favouring corporate contractors, including Coca-Cola".[13] Corporate ties were still present at the 2013 WSF in Tunis where giant multinational corporations, such as Petrobras, sponsored many workshops on environmental issues.[14] More generally, over the years the WSF has been financially supported by an association of corporate foundations under the advisory umbrella of Engaged Donors for Global Equity (EDGE), among which sit representatives of the Ford Foundation, the Wallace Global Fund and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.[15]

Reflecting upon how the threat of curtailment of donor funding is one of the best ways to ensure that grassroots dissent stays within the limits of constructive dialogue rather than confrontation, in a recent article Michel Chossudovsky has provocatively demanded of social forums activists: "Is it possible to build 'an Alternative' to global capitalism, which challenges the hegemony of the Rockefellers et al and then asks the Rockefellers et al to foot the bill?"[16] Beyond corporatization, the mode of action at the very centre of social forums has also received incisive criticisms. The most common activity found in WSFs consists of traditional panels of speakers—often white males over 50 years old—"with the audience being talked at rather than being engaged in discussion".[17] As such, social forums are easily made the object of mockery by members of the ruling classes, when they deign, that is, to pay attention. According to one commentator for *The Economist*, the WSF is comparable to "any other business conference though some participants carry spears and wear the feathers of various unfortunate parrots on their heads".[18] It is no wonder that many who want to overtly confront the global powers of capitalism are skeptical of the relevancy and efficacy of social forums as a form of resistance.

A Shift in the Mode of Action

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[12] Federação Anarquista Gaúcha, Federação Anarquista Cabocla, Federacion Anarquista Uruguaya, Coletivo Luta Libertária, Laboratório de Estudos Libertários, Solidarité Internationale Libertaire, "Journées anarchistes de Porto Alegre 2002–Déclaration finale", *No Pasaran*, no 7 (mars 2002). Retrived from: http://nopasaran.samizdat.net/article.php3?id_article=88.

[13] Marisa Holmes, "Why we occupied the World Social Forum", *Waging Non-Violence*, 2013. Retrieved from: http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/why-we-occupied-the-world-social-forum.

[14] *Idem.*

[15] For an essential discussion of corporatizing trends in activism and the multiplication of partnerships between non-governmental organizations and oil companies, discount retailers, fast-food chains, and brand manufacturers, see Peter Dauvergne and Geneviève Lebaron, *Protest Inc: The Corporatization of Activism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

[16] Michel Chossudovsky, "The Anti-Globalization Movement and the World Social Forum. Is 'Another World' Possible?", *Global Research* (2013). Retrieved from: http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-anti-globalization-movement-and-the-world-social-forum-another-world-is-possible/5335181?print=1.

[17] Firoze Manji, "World Social Forum: just another NGO fair?", *Pambazuka News*, no. 288 (2007). Retrieved from: http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/letters/39464.

[18] "Dear capitalists, admit you got it wrong", *The Economist*, vol. 390, no. 8617 (7 February 2009): 53-54.

As this article is written, the world is witnessing the lockdown of Northern Ireland in preparation for the G8 economic summit. The scene looks familiar, as today we are accustomed to the deployment of 'special arrangements' to keep citizens away from decision-makers when they meet to coordinate their actions behind closed doors. Exceptionally large police forces in riot gear, the mass arrest of citizens (including journalists, residents and passers-by), police spy operations on a variety of advocacy and political organizations, arbitrary search and seizures, temporary custody centres, the targeted intimidation of community organizers, security fences and cordons, are all nowadays part of the usual apparatus set up every time such an event takes place. Closed doors ensure control over discussions while closed streets ensure that the lack of transparency of these negotiations does not get too much attention. Nevertheless, in the last three years, there has been a powerful resurgence of popular attempts to reappropriate streets and other public spaces, including parks and plazas, across the world. Masses of protesters forcefully occupied the public squares of the Middle Eastern and North African region, Europe and North America to express their indignation and discontent against the arrogance and contempt of economic and political elites. Largely constituted by unemployed, young and precarious workers, these protests have not adopted the means of action favoured by the global justice movement—protest marches and social forums—but rather converged on city parks and squares to form communities of struggle.

This popular coalescence in public spaces has, as mentioned above, been largely explained by the efficient use of ICTs. Smartphone technologies and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs have indeed been widely used in recent protests, encouraging observers to describe the latter as 'revolutions 2.0', that is, revolutions enabled by technological supports. For instance, one scholar described the *indignados* movement as "a self-mobilization or social network format organized through the Internet" and pointed out how what he calls the "informational ecosystem" has allowed the movement to get around traditional mainstream media.[19] Commentators reached similar conclusions with regard to the OWS movement that erupted during the fall of 2011 when New York protesters pitched tents in Zuccotti Park. They highlight that it was thanks to social media and cutting-edge technologies, such as live-streaming video, that support rallies and occupations followed in more than 70 major cities and in over 600 communities in the USA, as well as in several hundred cities in Europe, Africa and Asia.[20]

It is my contention that while much excitement and energy certainly flows through social media and virtual networks, the focus on how ICTs empower non-state social actors by facilitating decentralized interaction and planning among widely dispersed citizens fails, nonetheless, to grasp the larger historical meaning of the type of action adopted by these protestors. Indeed, much of the social movement literature implicitly or explicitly sees in globalization and information technologies the *explanation* of social change, rather than locating the latter in the struggles and actions of people making their own history.[21] It elides, in other words, the very notion

[19] Mayo Fuster Morell, "The Free Culture and 15M Movements in Spain: Composition, Social Networks and Synergies", *Social Movement Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2012): 386.
[20] Jenny Pickerill and John Krinsky, "Why Does Occupy Matter?", *Social Movement Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2012): 284; Karla Adam, "Occupy Wall Street Protests Go Global", *The Washington Post*, October 16, 2011; Joanna Walters, "Occupy America: Protests Against Wall Street and Inequality Hit 70 Cities", *The Guardian*, October 8, 2011.
[21] For an incisive critique of this kind of argument, see Justin Rosenberg, *The Follies of Globalization Theory*

of human praxis and agency. This view has been amplified by a broader media culture that tends to portray protests as unexpected and spontaneous happenings—a perspective that obscures the long-standing traditions of resistance in which most protestors are embedded.[22]

Crucially, this media culture has also failed to relate in any meaningful way the recent social struggles to the outcome of the 2007-2008 global financial crisis—the most severe crisis since the economic depression of the 1930s. Far from spelling the end of the austerity consensus, the 'recovery' strategies of many governments around the world favoured the stimulation of financial activities at the expense of public investment.[23] These strategies did not result in massive job creation, poverty reduction or new income to be spent on consumer goods, as their proponents suggested. Much to the contrary, they brought about an austerity 'trap', well-illustrated by the fact that, five years after the crisis, the Eurozone has returned to recession and other advanced economies are experiencing stagnation or minimal growth.[24] Much the same can be said with regards to Middle Eastern and North African countries, where the ramifications of the near-collapse of the world economy have provided the pretext to implement more of the same austerity measures that have been imposed for three decades. As such, a clear continuum can be traced between the Arab revolutions and sustained cuts to subsidies for basic goods like food and gas, among other measures of austerity and privatization.[25] These austerity measures have further dispossessed people of their means of subsistence, driving them to take to the streets to reappropriate, as we will soon discuss, some of the last public spaces left in major cities.

A Struggle of the Dispossessed

In marked contrast to attempts to explain the essence of recent protest movements with reference to activists' use of ICTs, the remainder of the article explores the idea that it is ultimately the physical gathering of masses of people in concrete places that has given its strength and dynamism to the struggles that have developed recently. Clearly, people are forging links of solidarity that go far beyond individual virtual interventions in the blogosphere or on 'social' networks. The Arab Spring, the *Indignados* movement and OWS have in common a strategy of resistance to neoliberalism which is centred upon the bodily reappropriation of public spaces. As neoliberalism intensifies the enclosure

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(Verso: 2002) and "A Post-Mortem to Globalization Theory", *International Politics* 42, no. 1 (2005). See also Hannes Lacher, "Putting the State in its Place: The Critique of State-Centrism and its Limits", *Review of International Studies*, no. 29 (2003): 521–5.

[22] Kamilla Pietrzyk offers a timely discussion of this issue in "Activism in the Fast Lane: Social Movements and the Neglect of Time", *Fast Capitalism* 7, no. 1 (2010).

[23] International Monetary Fund, *Perspectives de L'économie Mondiale: Espoirs, Réalités, Risques*, 2013, 34–37. Retrieved from http://www.imf.org/external/french/pubs/ft/weo/2013/01/pdf/textf.pdf.

[24] How does Canada stand in this context of austerity has been studied by Éric Pineault and Simon Tremblay-Pépin in a research report entitled: "Cette fois est-ce different? La reprise financiarisée au Canada et Québec", *Institut de recherche et d'information socio-économiques* (June 11, 2013). Retrieved from http://www.iris-recherche.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Reprise-WEB-09.pdf.

[25] Adam Hanieh, "Egypt's Uprising: Not Just a Question of 'Transition'", *The Bullet* no. E-Bulletin No. 462 (February 14, 2011); David McNally, "Mubarak's Folly: The Rising of Egypt's Workers", *David McNally: Activist, Author, Professor*, February 11, 2011, http://davidmcnally.org/?p=354.

tendency of capitalism through the dispossession of the people, the impoverishment of parliamentary politics, and the delegitimization of extra-parliamentary politics, physical commons become more and more rare.[26] Recent protests in Turkey speak volumes in this regard: all major cities in the country have become the theatre of popular demonstrations following a governmental decision to go forward with the demolition of the Taksim Gezi Park—one of the last green public spaces in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district—and replace it with a shopping mall. The violence of the government's reaction, for its part, reveals just how threatening such an occupation of public space can be to the state.

The reappropriation of urban public spaces is an extraordinary struggle in our times, for the core logic of capitalism revolves around dispossessing people from the commons, and often by force. From the successive waves of 'enclosures' in the English countryside, depicted by Marx in the last section of *Capital,* to today's disappearance of subsistence agriculture under the bulldozing logic of agro-business, people have been kicked off common lands, expropriated from the soil, and refused non-market access to the means of production and social reproduction again and again. They have been forced into dependence upon the market and have lost any control over the means of production. The urban face of this capitalist logic of expropriation is no less cruel, as inner-city households are as equally market-dependent and subjected to the coercive toll of capitalist competitive imperatives as their counterparts in the countryside. Furthermore, while working class people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had succeeded in creating 'infrastructures of dissent' in neighbourhoods of industrial communities, neoliberalism has dealt a blow to many of these infrastructures and encroached upon citizens' ability to shape their urban environment and have a say in the spatial organization of their living.[27]

As a result of these dynamics, people's power to make collective decisions on issues related to wealth redistribution is limited, as is their ability to democratically organize their workplaces. Here, liberal democracies are no exception. In giving exclusive power to capitalists to organize production, political liberalism has both devalued parliamentary politics and de-legitimized extra-parliamentary struggles. As James Cairns and Alan Sears explain, even in liberal democracies

> there are many areas of life that do not seem to be governed by even the most basic features of people power. The idea, for example, that employees should elect management seems ridiculous in the context of most workplaces, and freedom of speech for employees, such as the entitlement to criticize management, does not exist. Workplaces are basically dictatorships, though they are certainly regulated by employment law standards and human rights codes established by governments.[28]

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[26] Ellen Meiksins Wood insightfully explores the presence of this logic at the heart of capitalism in several chapters of *Democracy against Capitalism* (Verso: 1995).

[27] This issue is discussed by Alan Sears in "Creating and Sustaining Communities of Struggle: The Infrastructure of Dissent", *New Socialist* 52 (2005). Sears has laid down the notion of 'infrastructure of dissent' to designate means of "communication, organization and sustenance that nurture the capacity for collective action", 32. They provide spaces for social movements to sustain a memory of past struggles, hold critical debates, and collectively elaborate subversive analyses.

[28] James Cairns and Alan Sears, *The Democratic Imagination: Envisioning Popular Power in the Twenty-first Century* (University of Toronto Press, 2012), 25.

By focusing on reappropriating public spaces and institutions, occupiers have gone a long way toward reclaiming the right to exercise extra-parliamentary politics. Moreover, they have had to learn concretely how to sustain the movement on a daily basis. In so doing they have reconnected some issues of labour and wealth redistribution to broader, communal questions of social interaction and everyday life, from waste and toilets to medical supplies, food, marshalling and affective relationships. This has been the case not only in confrontations with workplace managers and strikes at private property, but also in occupied parks and plazas. There, one of the greatest challenges faced by protesters has been to figure out actual organizational structures to ensure that their movements would be capable of enduring in time and space.

By taking back urban public spaces controlled by states and municipal powers, these movements temporarily challenged the ability of the established authorities to decide what was legitimately going to happen within these spaces. This could rarely be done without connecting with local organizations of activists, labour unions and NGOs, as so many resources, especially food, were indispensable to the day-to-day needs of protesters.[29] During the process, it was often the connection with neighbouring communities that enabled protesters to regain the power to decide, if only for a time, how communal life was going to unfold, with all that this pragmatically implies in terms of feeding people, setting up processes of collective deliberation, providing shelter, organizing communal child care and people's medical clinics, negotiating with legal authorities, disseminating alternative knowledge (through public workshops, popular universities, free libraries, etc.) and managing waste.

To be sure, attempts at building mini-centres of power within cities through popular struggles presents a certain continuity with previous struggles. After all, social movements struggling against neoliberalism have long been trying to develop "new forms of popular democracy—radical, participatory and direct".[30] In many cases, they succeeded—during the Water Wars of Cochabamba in 2000, for instance, or the upsurge of popular struggle in Argentina in 2001—to generate "quasi-liberated zones, where the power of mobilization neutralizes or is superior to that of local officials".[31] Moreover, occupations of all sorts have often characterized great social upheavals in modern history, as the representations of barricades during the Paris Commune of 1871 or the images of May 1968 remind us. Yet recent waves of protest have pursued the reappropriation of public spaces on a geographical scale not seen for decades, as occupations of squares and parks have burst out within a relatively short time span in several areas of the world. The fact that in many cases occupiers attempted to build autonomous local communities has led Sam Halvorsen to suggest that 'place-based' politics have been brought back to the centre of social struggles in a way that significantly differs from the logic of networking that characterized the global justice movement. Looking at the Occupy movement, he suggests that contemporary social movements "may be moving beyond the network as a dominant organisational form and political goal".[32] According to Halvorsen, among the contributing factors to this meaningful shift is the fact that

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[29] For an insightful analysis of the role of workers' strikes in the Egyptian upheavals, see McNally, "Mubarak's Folly: The Rising of Egypt's Workers".

[30] David McNally, *Another World Is Possible. Globalization and Anti-Capitalism* (Winnipeg et Monmouth: Arbeiter/Merlin Press, 2006), 350.

[31] James Petras, "The Unemployed Workers Movement in Argentina," *Monthly Review* 53, no. 8 (January 2002): 39

[32] "Beyond the Network? Occupy London and the Global Movement", *Social Movement Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2012): 427.

being grounded in a place contributes to the autonomy of social movements. As such, Occupy is "an important reminder that alternative imaginations for other worlds need territories as much as the connections that unite them across space". Halvorsen also highlights the fact that "'taking' and 'holding' spaces such as entrances to train stations or shopping centres" allows the occupiers "to excerpt an influence on the flows that pass through". In so doing, movements such as Occupy provide "a 'counter-temporality' to the fast-paced rhythms and flows around them," challenging the spatial and temporal arrangements of capitalist imperatives.[33]

Given capitalism's logic of dispossession, this is no small feat, especially as decades of neoliberal discipline have profoundly remodelled perceptions of time and space, as well as subjectivities, around the idea that individuals are responsible for interpersonal and family care.[34] In this context, the very idea of caring for others in the broader community beyond oneself and one's family appears somewhat remote from the daily demands of social reproduction. The question of *how* to collectively and democratically look after and provide for the needs of the community outside the market is more challenging than ever as so many aspects of our lives, including food, labour, land and social services, have been subjected to the capitalist imperatives of competition, profit maximization, accumulation and commodification.

It is perhaps in this sense that occupations of public squares and parks are at their most creative, for they provide learning spaces where people can envision living in a different way and at a different pace than those hammered in by existing disciplinary cultural institutions. In attempting to reappropriate city commons, people actively experiment with horizontal power in a way that potentially breaks away from capitalist sociality. Here, power is to be understood in its oldest meanings as 'to be able'. It is for people 'to be able', as McNally points out, "to control their social-economic interrelations," "regulate their communal life," and "make things happen":

> This is what it means to *empower* people or, better, for people to empower themselves. Of course, we are talking here of a very different kind of power from that which prevails in class divided societies. We are talking about power organized and exercised from below, by active human subjects engaged in a project of participatory self-government. […] [W]hat the experience of radical and revolutionary movements show is that there are alternative forms of power. And the most revolutionary of these is radical, participatory, assembly-style democracy.[35]

While the latest wave of social mobilizations has not succeeded in building infrastructures of dissent able to sustain the test of time, this does not mean that the communities created in their midst have not posited threats to the existing cultural, political and economic order, or even reached revolutionary proportions, as they did in some Middle Eastern and North African countries. As bodies gathered in urban public spaces, rulers almost everywhere reverted to repressive forces—courts, police or army—in order to shut down dissident voices. State violence has meant that many of these movements have

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[33] *Ibid*: 431.

[34] Meg Luxton, "Doing Neoliberalism: Perverse Individualism in Personal Life," in *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*, ed. Meg Luxton and Susan Braedley (Montréal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 163– 183.

[35] *Another World Is Possible. Globalization and Anti-Capitalism*, 364–365.

been forced to retreat, at least temporarily.

Gendered, Racial and Class Inequalities

The violence unleashed by states, together with internal contradictions emerging out of inequalities in class, gender and race, have yielded mixed results for the social movements discussed in this paper. OWS, for instance, has wavered in the face of judicial and police repression, as occupiers have been chased out of occupied parks and have not been permitted to return. In most cases, occupiers did not decide of their own accord when they were to leave: the state decided for them. Many were hoping that activities would resume and that camps would be set up again with the vanishing of the winter cold, but OWS has not returned with as much force as hoped, although in many cities across North America small groups of activists continue to be active in their communities. Two years after the initial occupation of St. James Park, for instance, Occupy Toronto still uses its website as a platform for news and runs projects such as free classes, the People Peas Garden and a live TV channel.

In many countries of southern Europe, demonstrations against austerity and the Troika (the European commission, the IMF and the European Central Bank) continue to liven up the political landscape, as do meaningful small-scale democratic initiatives from networks of co-operatives and groups of individuals. Sustainable mass democratic alternatives to parliamentary politics nevertheless seem out of reach. However, in the current context of growing austerity and social unrest, only time will tell what the future of Europe will be. On the electoral scene, eyes are turned toward the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) in Greece and the example it could provide for the rest of Europe should the coalition be elected. Radical left political parties in much of Europe, however, are far from gathering the same momentum and serious doubts surround the ability of left governments to instigate radical social change once in office.

It is in the Middle Eastern and North African region that the accomplishments of popular occupations are the most visible and spectacular. The longstanding socio-political context has long been dominated by authoritarian regimes, with the partial exception of Lebanon and Turkey. Yet, in less than two months (starting mid-December, 2010), the dictatorships of Zane al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt were overthrown by popular movements. Six months later, in August 2011, a military intervention led by NATO allowed 'rebels' in Libya to oust Muammar Gaddafi from power and take control of the government. The situation is far from settled as violent clashes between the police and the people are still ongoing in the streets of many of these countries. Crackdowns on protesters continue in Bahrain and Syria while it is with great disdain that the ruling classes of other countries (as in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen) have been forced by those on the streets to make parliamentary concessions. These concessions, however, are limited, and it is often Islamist parties—not always the most progressive of social forces—that have most benefited from electoral processes in the short term.

The Arab Spring shows that occupations of public spaces can be more an instrumental means to pressure political regimes and demand institutional change than conscious attempts at creating sustainable autonomous communities over the longer term. While keeping this in mind, the crucial fact remains that even when conceived more as tactical short-lived moves against state

repression than as communal projects of permanent reappropriation of spatial commons, waves of occupation provide extraordinary spaces for people to explore new means of resistance to state repression. Furthermore, such tactics create opportunities for people to concretely transform political subjectivities, as challenges related to inequalities in class, gender and race are dealt with in the heat of the action.

During Arab revolutions, sexual violence took extreme proportions, as mob sexual assaults were frequent in large gatherings and as the police and the army used sexual harassment and rape as a weapons against protesters. While not reaching the same proportion, within OWS misogynist attitudes and aggressive behaviour by male participants were also repeatedly reported, as were more subtle forms of gendered oppression.[36] As Journalist Karen McVeigh has remarked, "some voices are louder than others. While images of women as victims have endured, those who speak about the ideas and actions have been predominantly male".[37] Kanane Holder, an OWS participant, further explains that "[w]hite males are used to speaking and running things […] You can't expect them to abdicate the power they have just because they are in this movement".[38] Power imbalances were also evident between white activists and other protesters, an issue that was often not addressed head on. As Alan Sears explains, the very idea of 'occupying' is itself extremely problematic in the context of North America, for it

> is already occupied land taken from Indigenous peoples. Further, imperialist military excursions mean that occupation is an ugly fact of life for many in the world, including Palestinians, people in Iraq and Afghanistan and others. It is important to note the ugly side of the word, and to ensure we make anti-colonial, anti-racist and migrant rights efforts central to our agenda as we 'occupy' in the sense of a democratic and participatory take-over of public or private space, including factories, schools, parks,
> squares and streets.[39]

Furthermore, often unremarked are class imbalances. Conflicts between activists and homeless people, for instance, were frequent in occupied parks. Public space, after all, is home to those that do not have one. As such, it "represents the most important bulwark against the spatial obliteration of their 'right to have rights', a shrinking venue for the enjoyment of an individual's most basic right 'to be' without molestation by property owners or the state".[40] While many occupations were quite inclusive of homeless people, there were cases in which some of the homeless population had to leave the occupied site, even if they had stayed there for years, and, in at least one case, the distribution of food was banned to the homeless.[41] Clearly, while embodied class, gendered and racial

[36] Anonymous, "Occupy—The End of the Affair", *Social Movement Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2012): 441–445.
[37] Karen McVeigh, "Occupy Wall Street's Women Struggle to Make Their Voices Heard," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2011.
[38] Quoted in *ibid*.
[39] "Occupy Actions: From Wall Street to a Campus Near You?", *The Bullet* no. 560 (October 21, 2011), http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/560.php.
[40] Rebecca Schein, "Whose Occupation? Homelessness and the Politics of Park Encampments", *Social Movement Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2012): 338.
[41] Curtis Smith, Ernesto Castañeda, and Josiah Heyman, "The Homeless and Occupy El Paso: Creating Community Among the 99%", *Social Movement Studies* 11, no. 3–4 (2012): 359.

differences may not be as apparent when people exchange over social networks, they become fundamental realities once they meet in the flesh, create communities, and cope with the vast array of human needs, abilities and aspirations.

Conclusion

As unemployment rates in many regions hit record highs, especially among the youth, people who do not accept the truth or desirability of the austerity consensus have felt the need to take to the streets in order to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy and reopen claims to alternative politics. Given that traditional representative institutions, such as political parties and corporate unions, are forwarding the idea that no alternative social project can replace neoliberalism—let alone capitalism—it is in streets, parks and squares that the urge to be freed from market and state oppressions is expressing itself. On this matter, the article has argued that the particularity of these struggles cannot be reduced to the use of ICTs. For important as these technologies are in facilitating mobilizations, it is the place-based struggle of protestors physically occupying public spaces by putting their bodies on the line that has made these upheavals happen and forced rulers to revert to overt physical coercion.

Given that rulers seek to shut down street politics, movements are developing strategies to take back that of which they have been dispossessed: the ability to democratically control their lives and actively take part in the organization of their communities. In doing so, those gathered within the confines of urban common spaces to create worlds of their own—free from Arab dictators, European technocrats, or Bay Street stockbrokers—quickly confront the reality of brute force posited by the state. Their struggles give us significant indications of the kind of challenges that citizens searching to build communities beyond the immediacy of short-lived events and the virtuality of social networks have to face in terms of sustainable organizational structures of dissent.

It would be interesting to see what can be learnt from contemporary social movements other than those examined in this article. How, for instance, can the tactics used during 2012 student strike in Quebec be understood as part of a struggle to reappropriate the urban commons and what, more specifically, do the repeated night-time demos that took to the streets of Montreal's residential neighborhoods reveal in this regard? Also highly informative would be the comparison between the three waves of protest discussed in this article and previous social struggles in history that have had place-based politics at the centre of their actions. The mobilization of bodies behind city streets barricades has been a long-standing feature of urban warfare and popular uprising in modern history. These are all promising avenues for further critical reflection on past and future challenges confronting social movements in their attempts at envisioning alternative forms of sociality.