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Negotiating Power and Difference within the 99%

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ABSTRACT The Occupy movements have given voice to the widespread frustration that so few (the 1%) seem to hold all the power. The vast majority (the 99%) lacks an (equal) say in the social, economic, financial, political and ecological processes that affect our lives. Inspired by the 2011 global wave of protests including the Arab Spring, the Greek resistance, the acampadas in Spain, the Wisconsin uprising and the Israeli summer, and starting with the takeover of New York City’s Zuccotti Park on 17 September 2011, the Occupy movements have sought to overturn these power imbalances by using the occupation of public spaces, mass assemblies, tent cities and direct action to shine a light on the effects of growing inequality and the disproportionate influence of corporate power over our politics and economy. However, while the occupations rally against external systems of power, a widespread logic of aggregation and majoritarian populism have complicated efforts to recognize and address internal differences and inequalities. This article examines power and exclusion in the Occupy movements through an analysis of race within Occupy Boston, which began in late September 2011 and has continued in a decentralized fashion since the camp’s mid-December eviction. As scholar activists from diverse backgrounds, we employ observant participation, interviews and activist reflections to explore how occupiers in Boston have represented, negotiated and addressed internal power relations, suggesting that a shift toward networking logics, practices and forms offers a promising avenue for engaging differences as well as racial, class and other modes of exclusion.

KEY WORDS: Occupy, political protest, power, race, exclusion, social movements

Introduction

The facilitator, a white male, began the activity by asking for 20 diverse volunteers to line up side by side at the front of the crowd assembled at the Occupy Boston encampment at Dewey Square. He then issued a series of declarations: ‘If your ancestors lost land by the conquest of the U.S. government, step back; Step forward if your ancestors gained assets through the slave trade; Step back if your ancestors were brought here in chains to be slaves; Step back if you or your ancestors arrived as immigrants from Latin America, Asia, Africa, or the Caribbean’. These and other statements produced a visible line of stratification, with mostly white participants at the front and people of color toward the back.
More than 250 occupiers took part in this much anticipated anti-oppression workshop on 16 October 2011 in response to the widely perceived lack of diversity and experiences of exclusion at Occupy Boston. That the General Assembly had been cancelled for the first time ever to create a space for the workshop underscored the importance of the evening, although as organizers later noted, the attendees included many more women and people of color than usual, suggesting a self-selecting audience. Nonetheless, this was one of the first times Occupy Boston had addressed, in a collective and public way, the significant differences and power relations that despite the populist rhetoric continue to permeate the 99%.

This essay reflects on the dynamics of power and exclusion within Occupy Boston and the Occupy movements more generally. We focus on race and class, as did the anti-oppression workshop described above, but it is important to note that gender, sexuality, race and class all intersect to create overlapping systems of oppression. Within Occupy Boston, activists are constantly negotiating and contesting their places, identities, relationships and positions within complex webs of power. Indeed, a clear-cut understanding of power fueled the Occupy movements, as the discourse of the 99% versus the 1% united a vast group of people who felt they were being increasingly excluded from the fruits of society. This dualistic framework was a potent way to facilitate collective mobilization and political action, but the majoritarian populism reflected in the 99% frame, itself shaped by a powerful logic of aggregation in the Occupy movements (see below), has complicated efforts to recognize and address internal differences, inequalities and exclusions.

Through our own engaged ‘observant participation’ (Vargas, 2006) and semi-structured interviews with a dozen activists, we explore how occupiers have represented, negotiated and addressed internal power relations within Occupy Boston, suggesting that a shift toward networking logics, practices and forms offers a strategically promising avenue for engaging social differences as well as racial, class and other modes of exclusion. As scholar activists from diverse disciplines and backgrounds—two sociologists, an anthropologist and a psychologist; one of us is a white woman, another a woman from Puerto Rico and two of us are white men (we are all US citizens, identify as heterosexuals and come from middle-class upbringings)—our goal is to contribute to discussions of difference and power in the Occupy movements through a particular focus on the dynamics of race and class, as well as alternative forms of organization within Occupy Boston. Our analysis points to the need for a deeper engagement with internal differences and power relations among occupiers, as well as a self-reflexive, adaptable approach toward negotiating and bridging such differences.4

The Rise of Occupy and the Pitfalls of Majoritarianism

The Occupy movements have given voice to the widespread frustration that so few (the 1%) seem to hold all the power. The vast majority (the 99%) lacks an (equal) say in the social, economic, financial, political and ecological processes that affect (and threaten) our lives. Inspired by the 2011 global wave of protests including the Arab Spring, the Greek resistance, the acampadas in Spain, the Wisconsin uprising and the Israeli summer, and starting with the takeover of New York City’s Zuccotti Park on 17 September 2011, the Occupy movements have sought to overturn these power imbalances by using the physical occupation of public spaces, mass assemblies, tent cities and direct action to shine a light on the effects of growing inequality and the disproportionate influence of corporate power over our politics and economy, while simultaneously building a movement of equals where each voice is as important as every other.
Unlike the previous era of global justice activism, however, which involved a ‘movement of movements’ and was characterized by a powerful networking ethic of coordination across diversity and difference (Juris, 2008a), the Occupy movements with their majoritarian populist impulse and organizational logic of massing large numbers of individuals in concrete physical spaces (Juris, 2012) have had difficulty recognizing and addressing internal specificity and difference. The movements for global justice also had to confront a relative lack of racial and class diversity (Starr, 2004; Juris, 2008b), but their networking logic allowed them to grasp internal differentiation. As the occupations expanded beyond Zuccotti Park to cities across the USA, moreover, the use of social media together with extensive mass media coverage, after the first week at least, allowed occupiers to reach far beyond typical activist circles. This greatly expanded their base of organizing but also meant that many occupiers lacked an awareness of internal differences, privilege and intersecting racial, class, gender and other forms of domination typical of the wider society. Occupiers with greater experience, including many activists of color, have struggled to build awareness around these issues and to create structures and processes more conducive to the participation of marginalized groups.

The critique of the Occupy movement’s homogenizing discourse and practice expressed, for example, in the successful effort by a group of women of color to remove ‘post-racial’ language from Occupy Wall Street’s Declaration of Occupation, also extended to the concept of the 99% itself, which was widely recognized as a powerful semantic coup that frames the Occupy movement as a majoritarian challenge to the disproportionate political and economic influence of an elite few, but which also made internal differentiation more difficult to address. As Becky, a white anti-racist organizer in Occupy Boston, pointed out, the 99% frame ‘is ingenious and amazing in its simplicity, what I think is a problem is that it was taken on as “we are already the 99%.” For us to win against the 1% we need the 99%, not 23% of the 99%’.

Although individuals from marginalized groups did have a presence at Occupy Boston, including activists of color and members of the ‘houseless’ community (this semantic shift was used pervasively at the Dewey Square encampment), people of color and especially those from poor and working-class communities, were significantly underrepresented, particularly given the demographics of Boston, where non-Hispanic whites comprise a minority of the population. Beyond the challenge of recognizing internal differences and power relations, powerful structural barriers are also at work. Given the time and resources needed to participate in mass movements, not to mention the access to relevant information, it is no surprise that, with a few exceptions, contemporary movements in the USA—particularly those characterized by more informal, fast paced and individualized modes of participation—tend to be predominantly, if not entirely, composed of privileged actors with the economic, social and cultural capital necessary to effectively operate within them. In this sense, there has been an historical divide between the more ‘personalized’ politics of white and middle-class activists and the ‘communitarian’ politics of people of color communities that have tended to organize within more formalized grassroots organizations (Lichterman, 1996; cf. Juris, 2008b).

Recognizing the need to both engage the unequal racial and class dynamics within Occupy Boston and negotiate differing organizational logics and forms, community organizers and occupiers began holding ‘movement-building’ meetings early on to attempt to bridge the divide between grassroots organizations and the comparatively white, middle-class occupiers. Organizers grappled with the challenge of how to work with a movement
defined by an individualized mode of participation and voiced the importance of addressing the experiences of their working class, people of color constituencies: ‘the most deeply affected 15%’.7

Racial and Class Tensions within Occupy Boston

The movement-building meetings were initiated as a way to address a divide that arose early on between Occupy Boston and a network of community-based organizations. The first night of the occupation, Friday, 30 September 2011, coincided with a mass action against the Bank of America regional headquarters organized by a local anti-foreclosure group—City Life/Vida Urbana—in conjunction with the national Right to the City Network. That protest brought together thousands of mostly low-income people of color from across the country to engage in the largest anti-foreclosure action of its kind in Boston and perhaps anywhere in the USA. At the first assembly to plan Occupy Boston, which took place on the Boston Common just three days prior, organizers of the Right to the City event spoke out in an attempt to delay the occupation, pointing to the race and class differences between the two protest groups and the need to support low-income communities of color. However, those early assemblies were chaotic, involving several hundred people, including many first-time activists, coming together in the dark, and most people did not fully grasp the issue, particularly those who missed the first assembly. Moreover, the lack of an agreement upon a set of basic principles, structures and protocols and the highly individualized nature of participation in the assembly made it difficult to recognize the collective needs and interests of the different groups that Occupy Boston might engage, the potential tensions between them and the alternative strategies, tactics and forms of organization through which diverse constituencies mobilize.

Another incident of racial and class tension took place during the early days of Occupy Boston when a young white man claimed to have developed a list of common demands, sparking controversy when he failed to recognize that his list reflected his particular social location. As Jennifer, a middle-aged white member of the Occupy Boston facilitation working group, recalled:

This is a privileged white male [who] stands up, and I think with the best of intentions, reads what his list of demands are, and he says he thinks he’s come up with a good list because he’s been inclusive and has talked to a lot of people, but nowhere in his list of demands was anything about our criminal justice system... or the fact that our constitution actually has written into it racism and is anti-women, like women don’t get the vote and blacks are 3/5 of a person. When people started questioning what’s in his list he got angry.

The point Jennifer was making was less about the specific content of the man’s list than a critique of his non-self-reflexive, universalizing assumptions and behavior. For Jennifer, it is important to step outside of one’s own privileged perspective, recognize internal differences and make sure that marginalized voices are included.

Additional tensions more directly reflected structural contradictions and organizational differences between different communities. For example, Daniela, a Latina activist, explained that many of Occupy Boston’s structures and practices, including the time consuming assembly-based consensus processes, do not easily translate in the context of
communities that use different forms of organizing, mobilizing and decision-making: ‘If the point was to involve community members and immigrants, it was an inaccessible language, it wasn’t connecting with the people’. Moreover, ‘consensus is very democratic, but it takes a lot of time, and time is one thing our folks don’t have’.

For her part, Deborah, a young African American organizer, explained that the cultural tension between the individualism of mainstream occupiers and the communalism that, in her view, characterizes the grassroots organizations and people of color communities where she lives and works, contributed to her decision to back away from the movement. One way this tension played out was in her frustration with ‘autonomous actions’, which she felt undermined the collective will and put people from marginalized groups at risk. She believes in a diversity of tactics, but ‘there is also an importance to collective agreements, where you put what the community has decided as a whole above your own personal needs and desires’. She went on to implicitly criticize the highly personalized politics and logic of aggregation within Occupy Boston, lamenting that participation and proposal-making within the assemblies were driven by individuals, which discouraged more interactive and collective forms of decision-making where members of marginalized communities might feel more comfortable.

Recognizing Difference and Challenging Exclusion

Occupiers have developed multiple strategies for recognizing differences within the 99%, negotiating privilege and challenging unequal relations of power. For example, multi-racial groups of organizers and activists, including many with previous anti-oppression training, have formed working groups and organized trainings and forums to raise awareness about and begin to address privilege and oppression within the movement. At Occupy Boston, the group that held the anti-oppression workshop depicted in ‘Introduction’ section went on to create the anti-oppression working group which has continued to meet regularly since, as has the Decolonize to Liberate group that formed to bring the perspective of indigenous struggles against colonialism to Occupy Boston.

Meanwhile, members of traditionally marginalized groups have created their own spaces to discuss the needs and experiences of their members, while challenging exclusions of race, gender, class and sexuality and bringing a greater awareness of privilege and oppression to the struggle. At Occupy Boston, organizers and activists have created the People of Color Caucus, the Women’s Caucus and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer direct action working group. Outside Occupy Boston, organizers inspired by Occupy have started initiatives such as Occupy the Hood and Ocupemos el Barrio to mobilize working-class people of color constituencies using methodologies and engaging issues perceived as more relevant to their communities. Finally, the movement-building meetings that have attempted to bridge the divide between occupiers and community-based groups have provided another forum for organizers and activists to engage differences and relations of power within Occupy Boston. In this way, experienced organizers and activists of color have created multiple autonomous spaces within and around Occupy Boston that have allowed for diverse constituencies with distinct organizing traditions, practices and forms to coexist and work together within a more or less coordinated movement field. A hybrid model of organization has thus begun to emerge combining a logic of networking with a logic of aggregation.
Finally, innovations have also been introduced with respect to the assembly and decision-making processes to make them more accessible for working-class people and communities of color. These include a reduction in the number of General Assemblies per week from seven to four and finally to three, the introduction of a progressive stack where members of marginalized groups and those who have spoken less frequently are given preference on the list of people waiting to speak and the use of small group discussions to make deliberations surrounding proposals more inclusive, interactive and participatory. Nonetheless, critical challenges remain, such as ensuring that power, privilege and oppression are addressed outside particular caucuses and working groups, negotiating differences within marginalized groups and anti-oppression spaces, raising awareness and facilitating discussions without reproducing ideological rigidities and contending with the realities of lingering tensions and structural constraints to building diversity and cross-class, multi-racial alliances.

This essay has explored some of the differences and exclusions along axes of race and class that were reproduced within Occupy Boston, as well as various efforts to address them. Not only is it crucial to address power differentials within the 99% but also efforts to engage marginalized groups, including working-class communities and people of color, can be enhanced by further incorporating networking logics, practices and forms that make it possible to recognize internal power relations, facilitate autonomous organization and grassroots participation and promote coordination across diversity and difference. For example, the rise of ‘spokescouncils’ in many occupations, which provide smaller, more collective and interactive spaces for delegates of various working and affinity groups to communicate and coordinate, represents a promising shift in this direction. Although some occupiers, including participants in Occupy Boston, have viewed spokescouncils as a challenge to the authority of the General Assembly, signaling a tension between a logic of networking and a logic of aggregation, the two can and have effectively worked together: spokescouncils allowing for different groups and constituencies to organize autonomously in more intimate settings and then to coordinate their activities and actions, the General Assembly continuing to provide a mechanism for more individualized expression and decision-making around issues that affect the wider community.

Notes
1. Email: michelle.ronayne@gmail.com
2. Email: firuzehsv@gmail.com
3. Email: robert.wengronowitz@bc.edu
4. A special note of thanks to Bryan MacCormack, a student occupier, for participating in our research team by conducting an interview and sharing his insights regarding Occupy Boston.
5. The text that was removed included the following: ‘formerly (emphasis ours) divided by the color of our skin, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or lack thereof, political party and cultural background (Ashraf, 2011)’.
6. See also Maharawal (2011).
7. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect individual identities. All quotes are from personal interviews unless otherwise indicated.

References


Jeffrey S. Juris is an associate professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Northeastern University. He received his PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author of Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalization (Duke University Press), Global Democracy and the World Social Forums (co-author, Paradigm Press) and numerous articles on social movements, transnational networks, new media and protest. His co-edited volume, Insurgent Encounters: Transnational Activism, Ethnography, and the Political, is forthcoming with Duke University Press, and he is currently writing a new book about free media and autonomy in Mexico.

Michelle Ronayne has a PhD and MA in Clinical Psychology from Suffolk University in Boston, MA. In addition, she received her BA in Psychology from Connecticut College. She is interested in community psychology and group interactions, specifically in the dynamics of power as they are expressed in groups with a particular focus on the role that gender plays.

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Robert Wengronowitz is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at Boston College. He received an MA in the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago and a BA in Sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has two main interests that intersect in the notion of transformative praxis. First, he is concerned with social movements proper and the ways we bring about social, political, economic and cultural change. Second, he is interested in alternative agriculture, particularly how cooperative and community-driven enterprises can lead to a more environmentally sustainable, and perhaps more meaningful, way of living.