

“Where Is My Tribe”? Queer Activism in the Occupy Movements

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ABSTRACT: From the Arab Spring to the Umbrella Revolution, the last cycle of citizen protests has widely shared the strategy of occupying public spaces through the settlement of protest camps. Although one might imagine a homogeneous unity amongst the protesters, these encampments have been the scenario of multiple inner conflicts in relation with different vectors of oppression. This article discusses the conflicts faced and the coalition-building developed by queer activists in different encampments, with a focus on the relation between the occupation of queer spaces and the space of the protest as a whole. The Foucauldian concept of heterotopia is used here as a guide in order to understand the ambivalences and inner tensions of the space of the protest without losing, nor idealizing, the utopian impulse of these movements.

Introduction

Given their similarities, the label “Occupy movements” will be used here as an umbrella term for those movements that have shared the strategy of camping in public spaces at the heart of major cities, from the occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt to the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong. This label stresses their “core claim to space” (Pickerill & Krinsky, 2012, 279), evidenced through “the occupation and subversion of prominent urban public spaces” (Halvorsen, 2012, 431) that they all share with the Occupy movement as such despite the “disjunctures and fissures between these other movements and moments and the ways in which Occupy was conceived and practiced” (Pickerill & Krinsky, 2012, 279).

Another common feature of the Occupy movements is the way their inner complexity defies superficial readings of the slogan “we are the 99%”. A good way to counter reductionist depictions of the encampments as spaces inhabited by a homogeneous and non-conflictual multitude is to take into account the analysis of their inner tensions in relation with different vectors of oppression. Good examples of this kind of inquiry is the work carried out by various authors, addressing such topics as indigenous and decolonial struggles in North America (Barker, 2012; Brady & Antoine, 2013), race in Occupy Boston (Juris, Ronayne, Shokooh-Valle & Wengronowitz, 2012), homelessness in both Occupy Wall Street (Schein, 2012) and Occupy el Paso (Smith, Castañeda & Heyman, 2012), gender in the Occupy movement, with an emphasis on the articulation of women’s voices (Lewis, 2012) and paperless immigration in the 15M movement (Nair, 2012), among others that have aided in understanding some of the inner struggles of the protest camps.

This paper’s main aim is to complement this body of literature by focusing on a topic which has received little academic attention: the challenges faced and the strategies deployed by queer activists in different encampments and their complex relation with the space of the protest as a whole. I will refer to materials directly produced by queer activists in different formats, including brief articles in independent media sites, posts in blogs and other virtual spaces^[1]. Given the frequently ephemeral, minority character of queer activism, this essay faces some of the difficulties inherent to the process of accessing – and contributing to – the “queer archive”^[2] of the Occupy Movements, with the hope of making it easier for researchers from different academic fields to engage in further discussions of the topic.

Protest Camps as Heterotopian Counter-Cities

The protest camp is an anomaly in the space of the city. It entails the production of a different space, a spatial alterity or, more specifically, a counter-space. In the words of Henri Lefebvre,

counter-spaces respond "to the demands of a body 'transported' outside itself in space, a body which by putting up resistance inaugurates the project of a different space, either the space of a counter-culture, or a counter-space in the sense of an initially Utopian alternative to actually existing 'real' space" (Lefebvre, 1991, 349). Counter-spaces would thus be liminal spaces where utopian possibilities emerge in the realm of the "real" spaces of the city. This definition is rooted in the Foucauldian concept of *heterotopia* that Lefebvre also explicitly uses. However, the protest camps seem to be more intimately related to the Foucauldian origin of the concept than to Lefebvre's uses of it. For example, in *The Urban Revolution* (2003), he associated heterotopias with spaces of commercial trade and exchange in the historical context of emergence of the polis (9) and, later on, in *The Production of Space* (1991), with those differences that "endure or arise on the margins of the homogenized realm," that is, "what is excluded: the edges of the city, shanty towns, the spaces of forbidden games, of guerrilla war, of war" (373). It is true that Lefebvrian heterotopias constitute alternatives to the homogeneous and exclusionary production of public spaces in the neoliberal city. However, their spatially diffuse character makes it difficult to relate them with the very well delimited structure of the protest camps, not only spatially but also temporally.

Foucault in 1967 dedicated a conference to the concept of heterotopia, entitled "Of Other Spaces". There, he offered a discussion of those spaces that work as "a kind of effectively enacted utopia" (Foucault, 1986, 24). He contrasted utopias, ones conceived as ideal, imaginary spaces, with heterotopias, thought of as places that in "real" space introduce those forms of social alterity that we usually associate with the political and literary topic of utopia. "Enacted" utopias, therefore, that establish a critical relation with the space in which they emerge: heterotopias share "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (24). It is in their relational character where Foucault more clearly highlighted the most politically meaningful possibilities inherent to the spatial alterities that he had in mind.

For our purposes, it becomes necessary to relate the Foucauldian suggestion that heterotopias establish a critical relationship "with all other sites" with regard to the urban character of the movements to which they belong. With this in mind, the reference to "all other sites" refers, in the first place, to the space of the very same cities in which the emergence of the protest camps takes place. Not surprisingly, the maps of some encampments have been compared with that of the ancient Greek camp-cities (Nofre, 2013). Taking their urban character into account, their utopian impulse would necessarily rely on the critical inversion of the institutional life in the neoliberal city through radically democratic assembly-style politics, this being an inversion that, nonetheless, is not exempt of inner tensions that the unavoidable ambivalence of the concept of heterotopia helps to take into account. In the following pages, in order to retain their urban character in the Lefebvrian sense and their spatial "otherness," in the Foucauldian sense, the protest camps will be referred to as *heterotopian counter-cities*.

A Tent of One's Own

In her lecture "Bodies in alliance and the Politics of the street", Judith Butler included a reference to the variety of differentiated spaces in Tahrir Square encampment and its relation with the overcoming of certain "inequalities":

So the social form of the resistance began to incorporate principles of equality that governed not only how and when people spoke and acted for the media and against the regime, but how people cared for their various quarters within the square, the beds on the pavement, the makeshift medical stations and bathrooms, the places where people ate, and the places where people were exposed to violence from the outside. (Butler, 2015, 89)

She describes the organization of these spaces as one that, "overcoming class and gender inequalities" in relation with the distribution of tasks, was actually producing a "different space" to "Mubarak's regime and its entrenched hierarchies," making apparent that "the claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely *when bodies appear together or, rather, when, through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being*" (2011, my emphasis)

This bodily "bringing into being" is a key element when considering the strategies through which the attempt to build egalitarian relations within the space of the camp takes place. This is important in relation to those spaces within the protest camps where some gather to face or confront oppressions and forms of violence that have the particularity of being experienced, potentially at the very least, also within the limits of the space of the protest. Moreover, it seems to be the case that this kind of proliferation of different spaces within the heterotopian counter-cities plays a major

role when it comes to achieving the egalitarian goal that Butler refers to.

The settlement of the big feminist tent within Acampada Sol is a good example of this kind of inner spatial differentiation. The dossier of the feminist assembly of the 15M Movement in Madrid, *Feminismos Sol*, states that "via social networks, we tried to arrange for all of us to meet, really all of us, at the same place and at the same time in the middle of the crowd, but it was absolutely impossible. Yet we felt that our intention and the needs were quite clear. 'Shall we form a feminist block?'. 'Yes!'" (*Feminismos Sol*, 2011, 3; my translation). It was in the setting up of *a tent of their own*, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, that the formation of the feminist assembly and thus the emergence of a feminist voice within the 15M movement was made possible [3].

From the point of view of their relationship with the space of the protest, it should be noticed that *Feminismos Sol*, in terms of the organization of Acampada Sol, was established both as a "work group" and a "commission." Generally, work groups, are given the task of discussing political demands in relation to specific issues (economy, education, health, culture, among many other issues) whereas commissions deal instead with the inner organization of the camp as such (dynamisation of assemblies, communications, legal issues, inner coordination, infrastructures, and so on). This double status of the feminist assembly greatly exemplifies the double directionality of its political work: toward the rest of "the city," adding up a feminist perspective to the movement as a whole, and toward the space of the camp itself. The latter task included objectives such as the use of inclusive pronouns within *all* the assemblies of the movement, organizing open feminist workshops and, at a certain point, publicly denouncing different forms of violence that the members of the feminist assembly were suffering at the camp. This included aspects such as "sexual aggressions, sexism and homophobia," in the form of "sexual harassment, fondling, glances, gestures, disavowal and abuse of power, insults and physical aggression, unconsented sexual, and non-sexual, contacts and paternalistic attitudes" (46; my translation). This set of problems led to the decision of the members of *Feminismos Sol* to no longer sleep at the camp meaning that they would maintain the tent as a meeting point during the day. They did not refrain from calling public attention to the fact that the habitability of the camp for women and gender non-conforming people was not a given, but something to fight for.

Within the Acampada Sol, there was yet another group committed to the politicization of gender and sexual differences, this time from a specifically queer point of view: the *Transmaricabollo* [*transfagdyke*] de Sol assembly. Even if it did not occupy a differentiated space in the form of a tent, the gathering of activists in its assemblies nevertheless represented the "bringing into being" of a new physical and political space within the encampment. In this case, its creation met with some significant resistance coming from the feminist assembly. Given that the call for its formation had been made in the feminist tent, including the overlapping of the topics that both assemblies were addressing, some of those present perceived it as a subgroup of the feminist assembly as opposed to a fully independent assembly. After repeated debates amongst members of both assemblies, the consensus regarding *Transmaricabollo's* full independence was finally achieved, which signaled the constitution of an autonomous queer space in a proper sense (Redondo, 2014, 227; *Feminismos Sol*, 2011, 10).

In the same way that *Feminismos Sol* had to struggle with gender inequalities within Acampada Sol, the queer assembly had to work for the queerification of the space of the camp. This entailed the use of banners declaring it as a site where homo-, bi- and transphobia were unwelcomed; visible in a decided strategy of defiance to those slogans of the movement that included homophobic and "sex worker-phobic" slurs and featured the repeated dressing of an emblematic statue in the square with a rainbow flag, among other strategies that accompanied the emergence of a queer discourse in the form of manifestos, statements, and interventions in the general assembly of the movement (Pérez Navarro, 2014, 93).

Given the uniqueness of their relationship with the space of the camp, the formation of both assemblies can be read as the constitution of new, inner heterotopias within the encampment in order to resist everyday forms of sexism and "queer-phobia" common to the city as a whole and to the heterotopian counter-city by critically suspending, neutralizing, or inverting them. In this sense, the gathering of bodies in both assemblies shows how certain collectives need to occupy spaces of their own in order to render political action possible.

Coalition Building from Queer Spaces

The constitution of a queer assembly in the Occupy Austin's encampment is another good example. As Holly Lewis explains in "Occupy Gender: How Women and Queer People Find Their Voice in Mass Movements" (2011), the refusal of Occupy Austin's general assembly to address LGBTQ-

phobic violence in systemic terms, rather than as an episodic problem, caused many women and queer people to start to abandon the encampment (128). In the end, the well-intended presuppositions on the "radical inclusivity" of the movement, typically accompanied by the fear of the divisive effects that the diversification of political voices could entail and the "failure to address gender and racial injustice" was what "divided, weakened, and disengaged the movement" (129). The subsequent formation of the OccuQueers assembly encouraged women and queer people to "rejoin the movement as a novel, *for-itself* force" (129, my emphasis), not only by producing safe spaces for women and queer protesters, but also by assuring, through a frequent participation in the general assembly that became "routine in Occupy Austin", that "such blatant anti-woman and anti-queer sentiment [was] no longer tolerated" (129).

Holly Lewis uses the expression "for-itself" in what she describes as a Marxian sense for which "the articulation of a class for-itself occurs through the process of political mobilization and struggle itself: the process of struggle shapes the being of the collective"[4] (117). This approach would serve the purpose of avoiding any essentialist pre-definition of those who are supposed to be included in the constitution of what she refers to, nonetheless, as a "women's voice," in the understanding that "closing ranks through asserting the demands of the most vulnerable populations solidifies women as a unit and helps thwart political disintegration," a goal which would be "valuable because such actions help the group cohere and develop into a for-itself entity" (123).

However, one may wonder what a "for-itself force" actually means in relation to the emergence of queer activism, given that the blurring between any "for-itself" politics and "external" coalition building is, typically, a constitutive part of queer politics: the more "for-itself" they get, the more the bonds with a heterogeneous spectrum of oppressions start to proliferate from its very core. One of the unique aspects of queer activism is its tendency to undermine distinctions between "internal" and "external" differences in such a way that its political subject cannot longer be conceived "as a unit" in any meaningful sense, even though the "incohesiveness" of the subject of queer politics is not at odds with the relationships it establishes with specific forms of gender and sexual differences. In fact, the productive tensions that arise from the embodiment of highly specific subject positions and the expansive proliferation of queer subjectivities has been a distinctive feature of queer activism since the AIDS crisis, when AIDS and HIV-positive-related struggles offered the occasion for the establishment of unprecedented forms of solidarity and coalition-building along the entire spectrum of class, race, sexual and gender differences. In this sense, when read in terms of the formation of political subjects through coalitional practices, the Foucauldian characterization of heterotopias as spaces which establish a critical relationship with "all other spaces" serves as a good spatial metaphor for the ungroundable, incohesive character of the queer subject.

In the case of OccuQueers, this tendency is already implicit in their self-definition as a group "encompassing activists identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, genderqueer, asexual, intersexual, leather, polyamorous, kinky and other non-heteronormative sexual orientations, lifestyles, and identities as well as straight allies" (OccuQueers, 2012, June 10) but also one reflected in their direct involvement in the struggle against a wide range of overlapping forms of oppression. The list includes, but is not limited to, their coalition with the disability rights activist group OccuKripz (July 25), with End Homelessness for housing related struggles (March 8) and their participation (including organizational tasks, theatrical actions and the production of audiovisual resources) in the protest Occupy Austin Welcomes Obama –denouncing the US' use of drones and "his policy of killing anyone anywhere without due process" (July 31)– among other forms of coalition building. Even if some of them are in fact deeply related with gender and sexual discrimination, such as the politics of homelessness, to the point that they can be read as part of the constitution of the group in a relatively self-centered point of view, it is also true that seriously engaging with any of these struggles ends up by exceeding any possible conception of cohesive, "for-itself" conception of politics.

As a good example of the overcoming of a self-centered subject through coalition politics that departs, nonetheless, from extremely specific differences is the self-reflective discourse of the group Occupy the Rainbow during the occupation of Saint James Park in Toronto. Jordan B.G. was one of the activists who founded the group after perceiving the need for safe meeting spaces for queer people who were, like him, living with a dual diagnosis of HIV and hepatitis C. Upon this realization, he asked himself:

As my first week in the park progressed and I allowed myself to reflect, I wondered, where is 'my tribe'? Was this simply a labor or student movement? Safe spaces for other communities have developed, so how come there was nothing for queers? I often feel that our LGBTQ2S voices are not heard demanding justice in traditional movements. *We can often be silenced from within and never taken as more than a*

small element. At Occupy, again I felt that way – this wasn't a place for me, this was a movement of others, the majority, the 99%. (2011, my emphasis)

Again, the formation of affinity groups in order for certain voices to be heard came hand by hand with how certain groups of people became aware of the importance of occupying spaces of their own. These spaces served as a basis for processes of coalition building between different struggles in such a way as to undermine any coherent delimitation of the subject of queer politics: “we know that, as a community, we are all the letters of LGBTQ2S+”, *we are all the letters of the alphabet*, we are people of color, we are natives, we are unemployed, we are artists, we are working for not-for-profits, we are working for independent businesses” (Occupy the Rainbow, 2011, my emphasis). One of these overlaps between communities is implicit in Jordan B. G.'s question “Where is “*my tribe*?””, and made in explicit in the statement “we are the natives”, as much as in their consistent inclusion of two-spirit (2S) identities (referring to gender-variant people from North-American native communities) in all their minutes and calls. By joining the task of raising “awareness about the links between Indigenous issues and struggles against austerity, privatization and neo-liberalism, and sovereignty” ((de)Occupy Toronto, 2011), Occupy the Rainbow would not only be establishing links between overlapping forms of oppression, but also joining other groups in posing a fundamental question to the protesters: was their occupation going to be able to acknowledge and, more importantly, to challenge the deeply rooted exclusionary power relationships through which the public spaces they were occupying had been historically constituted?

Queering the Resistance in the Neoliberal City

The case of the Gezi uprising in Turkey is, from the point of view of this last concern, paradigmatic. The project to construct a shopping center in the Beyoğlu district was the last episode in a process of gentrification of the area that already carried a memory of “dispossession and displacement” (Nahrwold & Bayhan, 2013, 134) for different ethnic, religious and sexual minorities that had been specially violent for transgender people (134). Nonetheless, despite the intensity of the “conservative restructuring of public space” (126), the Beyoğlu district is still a cosmopolitan place where “different worlds meet and coexist” (134). And Gezi Park is, as well, a gay cruising area:

Both Cairo's Tahrir Square and Taksim Square in Istanbul, with the adjacent Gezi Park, in fact, are known as cruising areas, where gay people meet each other, make friends, organize sexual encounters. Gezi Park, which in the daylight is a paradise for families looking for a green corner, at night becomes the republic of a proletarian and almost anarchist homosexuality which prefers the trees along Mete street to chic gay clubs, when in search for a quickie, a male prostitute, a love... (Pier, 2013)

In this sense, as the “the biggest 'cruising' spot for the community” (Yildiz, 2013) Gezi was already a queer heterotopia before the uprising, if only because “the way it is experienced by the LGBT constitutes a counterhegemonic production of space” (Nahrwold & Bayhan, 2013, 135), that is, a space of otherness and resistance against the heteronormative production of public spaces. Which is not, in any way, independent of the economic life of the neoliberal city:

In order to ensure the 'safety' and 'well-being' of Turkey's youth and build his 'conservative generation' through increased procreation ('at least three children' per couple, he [Erdoğan] repeatedly ordered), Erdoğan commanded that 'Beyoğlu had to be cleansed, and the LGBTQ spaces dismantled. In other words, Erdoğan's larger 'renewal' project has always been equally interested in generating capital accumulation and heterosexual procreation. (Yildiz, 2013)

As a result, the underlying power relations through which the constitution of public space had taken place in this case had already produced a profound exclusionary impact on diverse minorities before the project of urban renewal. One that echoes similar processes of gentrification in many other cities in which the commodification of public space entails the production of a “safe domestic space, where families can occupy space without the threat of contagion from alternative forms of intimacy” (Bell & Binnie, 2000, 95).

For all these reasons, the presence of the “spontaneously-hung rainbow flag on one of the trees in Gezi Park” since the very beginning of the occupation, that worked as a “mark to find each other [LGBTQ activists] in the crowd” and facilitated “the formation of the LGBT Block” (Okçuoğlu, 2013) not only did not come as a surprise, but must be read as a meaningful reminder of the power relations that were already at stake in the history of the park before the settlement of Gezi Parks' heterotopian counter-city.

Once again, the work developed from the space occupied by the LGBT block was also bi-directional.

They participated in the global resistance against neoliberal politics that the shopping mall had come to symbolize and, at the same time, they conducted an inner work within movement. A work that entailed struggling against the use of homophobic slurs in its slogans (so successfully that "Erdoğan is a fag [ibne]" became "Erdoğan is sexist," as explained by Nahrwold & Bayhan, 2013, 136) and building solid solidarity links with the very diverse groups that had joined the protests.

In this instance, the impact of their very active presence at the protests in terms of coalition building was made evident by the massive participation in both the trans march on 23 June (which increased from 500 participants the previous year to 10,000 in 2013, see Pearce, 2014, 114) and in the LGBT march of 30 June (from 20,000 participants to at least 40,000 in 2013; see Pearce, 2014, 116). From the point of view of both "organizers and observers" this was mostly due to the "Gezi Park protests that yielded new allies" (117). Both marches are considered to "signal a historical turning point in the broader legitimacy of LGBT rights in Turkish culture" (111), to the point that the participation of the LGBT bloc at the Gezi resistance is regarded by some as a "transformative contribution to the collective memory of LGBTQ people in Turkey," which "may have opened up the possibility of thinking what was previously 'unthinkable'" (Okçuoğlu, 2013).

Following these events, the Turkish government was even praised by the Commission of the European Parliament in its "Turkey 2013 Progress Report" (COM, 2013, 53) for not having "disrupted" these marches, in contrast with the police brutality met by the Gezi protesters during the previous month. At this point, as Harvard University social anthropologist Emrah Yildiz has convincingly argued, it is crucial to avoid any reductionist reading of this contrast in the terms provided by any reductionist narrative of LGBT emancipation based on western categories of identity politics. The underlying danger of such a reading in the first place would lie in the acceptance of (neo)liberal tolerance of gender and sexual diversity as an isolated marker for social and political progress in addition to overlooking the local narratives on non-heterosexuality that cannot be simply assimilated within the LGTB acronym. The LGBT bloc, or even the LGBT Turkish movement as a whole, have been quite successful at counteracting that kind of western-centred narrative. This has occurred mainly by virtue of the strong links of solidarity established with other minorities (which, in any case, are overlapping ones) and among which is the Kurdish population, a common target of state violence and a prominent example. Other instances of this type of solid coalition were the chants during the LGBT march denouncing the very recent "brutal military response" to a march held at the Lice district in Turkish Kurdistan and the restructuring of the calendar of activities of the week as a direct consequence (see specially Yildiz, 2013).

Conclusions

In light of the recurrence of the set of challenges faced by queer activists in the Occupy movements, I would like to suggest that the analysis of queer activist interventions in massive citizen protests should take into account, at the very least, the following elements: the importance of occupying spaces "of their own" within the space of the protest, the double directionality of the political work developed from those spaces, the productive tensions between the sometimes highly specific character of queer identities and the wide scope of the coalitions that they engage in, and, finally, the relationship established with the constitutive exclusions of those urban spaces in which the protest takes place.

All these lines of inquiry point at the somewhat ambivalent position of queer activism within mass citizen protests. The effects and outcomes of its interactions with the movement as a whole are always dependent on unpredictable encounters and processes of conflict resolution within each specific context. In this sense, the analysis of queer activism helps greatly to underscore a general trait of the Occupy movements themselves. In her speech in Occupy Oakland, Angela Davis contrasted the social movements of recent decades, "which have primarily appealed to specific communities" with the unity and inclusivity of a movement which "*imagines itself* from the beginning as the broadest possible community of resistance – the 99%, as against the 1%". And she posed the most crucial question linking this imagined coalition with the *effectively enacted* one: "how can we come together in a unity that is not simplistic and oppressive, but complex and emancipatory?" (Davis, 2011). What the concept of heterotopia helps us to grasp is the complex relation between this imagined, utopian unity and the actually enacted one. Its inherent political ambivalence allows to highlight that this kind of coalitional politics is never a given but rather a possibility opened up by the repetition, at a different scale, of the challenge launched by the movement through its occupation of public space. In the same way that the movement as a whole poses a radical alternative to what is perceived as a neoliberal hijacking of democracy, so do the proliferating minorities within the movement occupy spaces of their own within the space of the protest, posing the question of whether or not, or to what extent, they are going to be able to establish effective forms of coalition in order to multiply their forces.

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[1] For a very similar approach to the research on queer activism in the context of massive citizen protests see the introduction to *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (Shepard & Hayduk, 2002, 7).

[2] Defined by queer theorist Jack Halberstam as “an eclectic merging of ethnography, oral history, online databases and homepages, collections of zines and temporary artifacts, and statements and descriptions from activists and cultural producers,” as summed up by Mathias Danbolt (2008: 93).

[3] For an interesting reading of Woolf’s room of one’s own through the lens of the concept of heterotopia, see “Taxi! The Modern Taxicab as Feminist Heterotopia” (Fernald, 2014).

[4] Lewis presents this concept in opposition to Hegel's definition of "in-itself" phenomena, understood as "the bare facts" of their "existence, as disorganized potential" before any processual articulation, "in both language and being" that can turn them into a "self-aware and mature force" (Lewis, 2011: 116).

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