

Hi Folks –

This is a first stab at the Occupy octopus. I intend to revise this a few times over the next month or so to improve its focus and then submit it for publication in a sociology or humanities journal. Thanks for reading. I am looking forward to the conversation and to seeing friends, old and new.

Best,
Louis

Occupy Los Angeles: A cultural model of movement cycles¹

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Movements are narratives shaped by the collective imaginaries of their participants. Movement emergence, peak, and decline is defined by the relationship between the social imaginaries of movement participants and their ability to act out this vision in the movement space. Gathering data from ethnographic field notes taken during the occupation of Los Angeles City Hall Park, participant observation in General Assembly and committee meetings located at the site, and media reporting, I describe the endogenous factors leading to movement emergence, peak, and decline.

Intramodal movement cycles are primarily defined endogenously by the individual imaginaries of collective agents. The bounded time and space containing the physical occupation of City Hall Park constrained resonant repertoires and narratives. In the following sections I describe three distinct imaginaries of the possible, spanning the life cycle of the occupation of the park. The movement's initial deployment in the first weeks of October 2011 contained a broad, idealistic social imaginary. Once the movement's resonance with the broader public reached its crest in late October and early November, the imaginaries of movement activists were in crisis as competing visions of the possible vied for hegemonic influence at General Assembly and constituent committee meetings. Nearing the end of the physical occupation of City Hall Park on November 30, a scripted conclusion excluded all but those social imaginaries consistent with a prefigurative narrative of the occupied space. I then discuss conceptions of power in prefigurative movements. Central to the paper's conclusions is the methodological focus on spatially and temporally bounded movement cycles.

Social movement cycles and waves are more classically understood as a rise and fall in the number of movement events, victories, participants, or the number of media articles about the movement. There are times of movement efflorescence and times of relative calm. We also understand that times of higher movement activity creates "spin-off" and/or "spillover" effects, perhaps explaining their rise. These and other exogenous factors describing movement cycles have described an important pattern.

Cycles, however, like movements themselves, depend on social or political grievances. Grievances alone do not create a movement. But the relationship between that grievance and an imagination of another set of social relations, does. While classical enumeration of members and victories provide context, we must understand changing social imaginations if we are to understand the emergence, crest, and decline of this category of collective behavior.³

The case

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³ This un-cited section does not constitute engagement with this literature and is in draft form, though I would welcome your comments on how and where (or if?) to engage that literature as I revise.

On October 1, 2011, about a thousand people marched from Pershing Square to City Hall Park in downtown Los Angeles. Inspired by the encampment at Zucotti Park in New York City two weeks prior, LA activists established a tent city in City Hall Park where they stayed until their eviction nine weeks later. City Hall Park is one square block surrounding LA City Hall. The group had marched on the sidewalks when coming up from Pershing Square to City Hall in order to avoid arrest.

Occupy LA can be understood in a variety of ways: a solidarity movement with Occupy Wall Street; a point in the current global wave of prefigurative protest; an illustration of a movement driven by social media. While the occupation phase of the occupation movement was all of these, central to the movement narrative was holding City Hall Park. The park was re-named "Solidarity Park," to reflect the desired relationship among different kinds of activists present in the movement. This repertoire of reclaiming public space through the symbolic changing of a name travels through the same channels that the diffusion of the occupation tactic itself travelled, from the Zucotti Park encampment to its satellite and support movements throughout the country and abroad. The space was opened up to community groups and local activists groups to set up tables and booths for a wide range of issues including advocates for the homeless, mental health services, environmental groups, communist and socialist organizations, food distribution booths, a library, a concert space, child care services and so forth.

The Occupy LA movement was managed by a culture of direct democracy and individual autonomy. Although the occupy tactic has been used for over one-hundred years, the latest resurgence of the tactic can maybe be placed with the Zapatista movement in 1994, through the alter-globalization movement starting in 1999 and the various prefigurative movements between then and now.

The encampment was managed by a General Assembly, which met each night of the occupation. Some movement participants had been gathering during evening meetings in Pershing Square prior to the occupation of City Hall Park. The General Assembly operated using a consensus decision making procedure and the movement published documents in print and online on how to conduct business at "People's Assemblies." They also had workshops for incoming members to train them on these procedures and on other matters pertaining to the committee structure and governance of the liberated space.

Setting up Camp

On the first night of the tent city encampment, the General Assembly meeting was consumed by a debate as to whether to sleep in the park or to sleep on the sidewalks surrounding the park. Many activists had already set up their tents on the lawn, but many were concerned about the legality of their encampment since the park closes each night at 10:30. Anyone remaining in the park could be at risk for arrest after the requisite warnings that the police must issue before doing so.

Camping on the sidewalks of Los Angeles on the other hand, is legal and many activists advocated that the group camp on the sidewalk for the night until they could obtain a permit or other permission from the city or police department to stay in the park. Most activists chose to sleep on the sidewalk, although some did sleep in the park. The police did not make any arrests at the site. This continued for a few days until the city council passed a resolution in support of

the occupation on October 4, giving the movement an implicit permit to stay in the park, overriding the park hours.

Many movement activists advocated for a conciliatory relationship with the city and the police department to avoid breaking any laws. Others did not value maintaining a positive relationship, some having experienced police repression in previous movements in Los Angeles. During a committee meeting on October 2nd, one activist that chose to camp in the park expressed to the group that she had been harassed and threatened by members of the movement who disagreed with her choice. This occupier felt that this was not conducive to solidarity and that we should agree to disagree about tactics.

Central to the movement was their conceptualization of power dynamics. The occupation phase of the Occupy LA movement was characterized by a commitment to physically camp out at City Hall Park. This is a consequence of prefigurative narratives of power influencing how the movement thinks of legitimate use of public space. There was pressure expressed at General Assembly and committee meetings that emphasized the importance for activists to stay overnight in the park and to attend regular General Assembly meetings. This high cost of privileged participation, combined with other factors, placed mostly young whites at the center of movement governance structures.

There was also a significant number of religious groups and other older white cohorts during this first phase of the movement. Activists who were initially present in this phase are those who seemed to already be engaged citizens that weaved their own local and national issues into the occupy narrative.

Government tolerance of this social experiment created a brief flash of expression that allowed activists to reconcile their prefigurative politics and their movement actions. The city yielded governance of park activities to the General Assembly, shifting some conflicts for activists themselves to work through in their own meetings. Tactical disagreements on how to implement a prefigurative vision arose frequently.

Occupy activists had a difficult time making meaningful links with long-time activists and community organizers that do not share the prefigurative discourse. These include unions, urban housing organizers, homeless people's rights organizers and others. They also had difficulty bridging the gap with organized ethnic communities less than a mile to the east, just across the Los Angeles River, or even just a few blocks to the south in what is popularly named "Skid Row," containing the largest stable homeless population in the United States.

These depart from the Occupy issues that the movement promoted to the broader public, which revolve around homeowners issues, student peonage, and government economic policies. It is difficult to maintain this continuity while also maintaining direct democracy without exclusion of the issues of some participants. This dynamic crippled the ability of the movement to keep a single focus and hampered their ability to effectively execute on externalized principles.

The General Assembly operated on a guide that described "People's Assemblies" and created by the Puerta del Sol Protest Camp in Madrid. The document illustrates the prefigurative discourse that it operates under. Describing the deliberative process in people's assemblies, the document promotes "Collective Thinking," stating that "Collective Thinking is diametrically opposed to the kind of thinking propounded by the present system." People who do not agree with decisions "are not obligated to carry it out." This libertarian position creates the condition under which the movement cannot undertake directions.

While the movement promoted its open structure, in the two months of my fieldwork, activists at the encampment were unwilling to offer how the website was created, its management, or much information about funding. While available from resources outside of the encampment, some activists expressed frustration and became suspicious that there was certain information that did not leave the media tent except through privileged channels.

The presence of drugs became a problem at the encampment and increasingly became a source of criticism from the media. Sexual assault was also reported to police. It is not yet clear as of this writing if this constituted a departure from normal levels of drug use and sexual assault in the area until more data becomes available.

People come to the movement for their own reasons. Describing the Amsterdam squatters movement of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, Lynn Owens argues that “[p]eople invested in particular stories because they were invested in particular images of themselves and the movement.” People come to occupation encampments with their own ideas about what should occur. The occupation of City Hall Park created a geographical space that allowed activists to express their personal and social imaginaries in a prefigurative space.

The Crest

After resolutions from LA city council on Oct 4th and Oct 12th and in support of the occupation and statements of support from Mayor Villarigosa, public sentiment and distinguished individuals began to engage and accept the occupy narrative in Los Angeles. Nationally, the movement for the “ninety-nine percent,” Occupy Wall Street and its satellite support movements seemed to have fulfilled its ambitions by opening the national dialogue and influencing its vernacular and some of its values. The strength of this public legitimacy in the nation and locally in the city of Los Angeles created a safety bubble around the encampment. The encampment became a tourist attraction with visitors milling through from out of town on the weekends and occupiers created a jubilant atmosphere with live music, silk screening, clothing swaps, dancing and activities. Booths and tents began to “dig in,” creating a sense of permanence. The food kitchen, nurses station, media tent, welcome station, and child care areas moved and expanded to meet the demand and the changing pressures. The fixed homeless population at the encampment increased as people saw a safe space being created for them just a few blocks north of “Skid Row.” New stations offering mental health, housing, and other services sprang up to accommodate the need at this location. Existing ad-hoc facilities became professionalized. The changed demographic from young and old whites to an encampment now including more Blacks and Latinos also changed the nature of discussions in committee meetings and at the General Assembly.

Disruptive tactics were not necessary at this stage in order to gain movement traction in the public discourse. This discouraged some activists who found other ways to engage in disruptive tactics by marching on large banking establishments around the city and engaging in cultural disruption on public transit. Those that left were quickly being replaced by new activists who were attracted to a more stable and safe environment that was sanctioned by the city. University professors began to send their students to the encampment for extra credit or on assignment to deliver surveys to occupiers. Some local professors also gave a series of free lectures on the weekends.

Some also felt that the movement goals were not the most important goals for Black and Latino groups. Occupy the Hood, originating in New York, spread to the Los Angeles

encampment and began holding their own General Assembly meetings and established their own committee structure. They began to decentralize the occupation, sending occupiers to other parts of the city, arguing that, “This movement is called Occupy Los Angeles not Occupy City Hall Park.”

The relationship with police, once stabilized, was re-introduced as newly arriving Blacks and Latino populations who have been exposed to higher levels of police abuse and activity in their communities. White activists who were interested in more disruptive tactics also began to return and speak out against police brutality issues in Los Angeles.

Decline

Movement decline is characterized by a change in the social imaginary from one of possibilities to one of factionalism and conflict position. This can sometimes be associated with an actual change in membership of persons who hold this different orientation.

As the movement gained in popularity, competing narratives draw the movement’s resources and energy in different directions, consuming the movement. This is a facet of prefigurative movements and a consequence of holding a static platform and democratic governance in a balance.

Demobilization, classically, is understood as a decline in movement membership participation, a frame that no longer resonates with the public, and tactical repertoires that are no longer effective. But this demobilization was a result in the changing imaginaries that movement actors brought to the occupied space.

As the mayor became impatient with the movement and as occupations in other cities began to be removed by local authorities, the Mayor offered the General Assembly an alternative space for them to be situated at in an attempt to move the encampment from City Hall Park. The General Assembly could not come to a consensus about the offer and eventually the offer was rescinded and the encampment was threatened with arrest.

The focus of the movement, once the imaginary becomes fragmented and accommodates a diversity of tactics, focuses on injustices experienced from police forces, imprisoned movement activists and their court hearings, and resentment of activists perceived as being less committed to the movement or who articulate an alternative movement narrative. The movement became desperate at the threat of eviction because their narrative had been tightly coupled with the park. To not have the space meant to face a crisis of rhetoric and a breaking of the preexisting social imaginary and the acting out of that vision.

The encampment was removed in the early hours of November 30th after a threat and delay of eviction on the previous night. A surge of activists more than doubled the numbers of people that had been in the park on previous nights to confront the police in an attempt to prevent or delay eviction. Although many people picked up their tents and left, over two-hundred were arrested in this struggle with the police. During these last two nights, many of the new-comers seemed to be highly seasoned activists with previous experience confronting police. Medical clinics using anti-tear gas equipment and fluids seemed to spring up and some activists climbed into the trees of the park, which I had not previously seen or heard reports of in the nearly two months of the encampment.

These repertoires in the late stage of the movement is more consistent with what is observed in “convergence cultures” that surround actions against meetings of the Bretton Woods

institutions, the G8 Summits, the political party conventions, and the Olympics. (Esparza & Price 2012) This next change in the demographics brought an additional change in the social imaginary from one of celebrating a prefigurative space to another that engages in protecting it at a cost.

The Prefigurative Conception of Power

Most people think about power in terms of powerful people, powerful institutions, or instances of control over others. However, social movements demonstrate that power relations can operate differently. Under some circumstances, unexpected groups of people who have been under the control of others, and perhaps had accepted the authority of others as legitimate, resist and take action on their own behalf. These occasions reveal the socially constructed myth that creates the basis for authority and control. Feminist activist Barbara Demming argued that,

We act out respect for ourselves by refusing to cooperate with those who oppress or exploit us. And as their power never resides in their single selves, always depends upon the cooperation of others-by refusing that cooperation, refusing our labor, our wits, our money, or blood upon their battlefields, our deference, we take their power away from them. (1974, p. 8-9)

Prefigurative and reform-oriented movements have different conceptions of power relationships. It is important to be explicit, instead, about what prefigurative power is. The classical thesis defines power as the ability of one person to force another to do something against their will. However, this logical construction is impossible.

If Person B resists Person A, then Person B is exhibiting power, or, resistance. If this is the case, then it follows that Person A is merely attempting to assert constructed authority, without actually having any more power in actuality. In fact, any and all agents always do have an equal ability to wield power. This is the case because Person A does not actually have any more power than Person B. Person A is in this case exerting the impression that it is the case that they indeed have more power than Person B, when in fact it is not. Person B always has power, latent or active, to resist any attempt to do something against their will, even if the individual activation of that power results in death.

As Sociologist C. Wright Mills warned us, the current coupling of power and ability is a long held, but false assumption: “to say that those who succeed to power must be ‘smart,’ is to say that power *is* knowledge. To say that those who succeed to wealth must be smart, is to say that wealth *is* knowledge. These assumptions do reveal something that is true: that ordinary people, even today, are prone to explain and to justify power and wealth in terms of knowledge or ability.” (emphasis in original, 1955) The prevailing construction of power, the “ability” of Andrew to force me to do something against my will, necessarily *assumes* that Andrew has this ability while I do not. This ability on the part of Andrew, it must be assumed, comes from having acquired superior knowledge, wealth, or the devolution of authority over me. We should therefore conclude that the accumulation of knowledge, wealth, or authority can lead to power. But this assertion is also logically false.

Richard Cloward and Fran Piven argue,

The study of protest movements necessarily focuses on just those occasions when an understanding of resources for power as valued things or traits becomes demonstrably inadequate. Sometimes in the course of protest movements people without land or capital or technical expertise nevertheless compel those with such resources to do what they would otherwise not have done. If we are to understand why those with fewer resources occasionally prevail, we need a different way of thinking about power. (1984)

Such a theory of power rests not on the ability of an actor to coerce, influence, persuade, or dictate, for such abilities depend on the relative strength of another actor. Instead, power rests squarely in the ability and willingness of previously subordinated actors to resist. Sudden declines in the authority of actors perched atop hierarchies are generally the result of an assertion of power by persons or groups without such authority who have withdrawn their stock from a particular hierarchical organization of society. (for instance, what is going on at City Hall right now) Authority figures cease to wield this authority once others do not recognize it. *Power* occurs when one resists such attempts at domination or when one resists attempts to control one's agency or self-determination or sovereignty. Coercion, influence, persuasion, and the perception of authority veils this potential *power* that comes into focus when activists unleash its decentralized but unrelenting and static social force. *Power* and authority are mutually antagonistic and opposite forces: authority being an attempt to dominate others and *power* being resistance to such attempts. Even more simply, *power is indomitability*.

Even when *power* and authority are paired, as happens when hierarchically-organized unions resist even greater capitalist structures, *power* continues to be indomitability.

Structures of authority, within movements cannot create lasting change, for collective power can only be accessed through the interdependent relationships of a community. As Cloward and Piven put it,

The issue of movement organization cannot be separated from the issue of power [...] The power of those who are ordinarily powerless does not derive from the valued assets or traits they control; by definition, they control few of these things. It derives from the patterns of interdependence that characterize all of social life, and from the leverage that inheres in these interdependent relations." (Cloward and Piven 1984, p. 588)

This conception of power is at the core of Mahatma Gandhi's theory of *satyagraha* which inspired non-violent resistance movements throughout the twentieth century. Gandhi often translated the Sanskrit into English as "civil resistance." *Satyagraha* is, indeed, the way that those who are not in positions of authority are best able to assert themselves form of power. They are able to assert power it collectively, through civil resistance, but they may also exhibit it individually, through *individual power*. While expressions of civil resistance exhibit *collective power*, individual instances of resistance to authority reflect *individual power*.

Popular power is the main weapon that activists have access to. This non-institutional form of power is what Hannah Arendt meant when she defined power as the opposite of authority. (Arendt 1970) Such a theory of power rests not on the ability of an actor to coerce, influence, persuade, or dictate, for such abilities depend on the relative strength of another actor. Instead, power rests squarely in the ability and willingness of previously subordinated actors to

resist. Sudden declines in the authority of actors perched atop hierarchies are generally the result of an assertion of power by persons or groups without such authority who have withdrawn their stock from a particular hierarchical organization of society. Authority figures cease to wield this authority once others do not recognize it. Because, all individual agents have the same amount of *power*, acting on their own behalf, the sugar workers tipped the local situation closer to this state of equilibrium. *Power* occurs when one resists such attempts at domination or when one resists attempts to control of one's agency or self-determination or sovereignty. Coercion, influence, persuasion, and the perception of authority veiled this potential reality of *power* that came into focus when workers unleashed its decentralized but unrelenting and static social force during the strike. *Power* and authority are mutually antagonistic and opposite forces: authority being an attempt to dominate others and *power* being resistance to such attempts. Even more simply, *power is indomitability*.

Philosophers have long treated prefigurative movements and societies as one and the same. Anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin argued, in opposition to Thomas Hobbes, that it is human nature to help one another in solidarity with others (as opposed to the assumption that human nature is naturally competitive). Kropotkin introduced the concept *mutual aid*, to describe how people operate in unison with one another. (Kropotkin 1987 [1902]) Dorothy Day later built prefigurative Catholic Worker communities across the United States and elsewhere using this concept. Day argued that communities operating under mutual aid minimize the kind of hierarchies produced by charitable structures. All parties in a system of mutual aid have the ability to produce an agenda, and the fate of one person is coupled more tightly with the fate of another. Because of the relative organizational flatness that many contemporary prefigurative movements have exhibited, they are able to take advantage of a broad array of creative tactics. Catholic worker communities have sustained oppositional structures that continue to be used as places of prefigurative resistance to this day. As Sharon Erickson Nepstad as shown, Catholic Worker communities have served as an important base for the international Plowshares Movement. (2008)

Actually eliminating 'authority' from social life has proven to be difficult and may prove to be impossible. Murray Bookchin came to the conclusion that *libertarian municipalism*, or, the enforcement of *collective power* through local democratic decision-making spaces, can lead to community empowerment. (Bookchin 2007) Such networked structures, loosely adhered to, can provide effective local community management, and thus, effective resistance to extant authorities. What may be achievable is for communities and social movement organizations to permanently mobilize themselves to provide an equal opportunity for a decentralized distribution of minimal, accountable *structures of authority*. Enforced, rather than imposed structures, deliberately rotated, destroyed, recreated and redistributed to the liking of those communities involved in local governance, is a difficult but more achievable reality than the absolute idealism that activists constantly bend toward.

Conclusion

Movement cycles are shifts in social imaginaries from emergence, to peak, to decline. movement demobilization is characterized by a change in the social imaginary of movement membership from hope to acute conflict. Occupy LA experienced this change via a change in its members over time.

The Occupy Los Angeles movement did not end on November 30, 2011. I have chosen to begin and end the analysis here on the cycle of physical occupation at City Hall Park between October 1 and November 30, 2011. I have also chosen to focus solely on the main occupation located in Los Angeles. The conclusions I have reached are a result of these decisions. Scholars and activists should interpret my discussion here accordingly and re-interpret as events develops further.

Social imaginaries drive the possibilities at the inception of a movement, cement its success at a crest, and drive its tactics at its demise. They are linked to the political identities of activists involved and constrain the outcomes that the movement brings about. Different tactics and repertoires at the various stages of the movement are a result of the shifts in what is imagined to be possible.