February 1, 2013

Protest and Politics Workshop | Introductory Comments

Dear Participants,

Although I’ve been thinking about the problem I set out to address in the following pages for about a year, the paper you are about to read is an early draft and should be approached as a work in progress. The problem I seek to address concerns the manner in which social movements tend to see resistance as a process of logically-representationally negating their opponents. As a result of this tendency, terms and tactics associated with the opponent are often disavowed. Nevertheless, it seems that it is often precisely these terms and tactics that—if appropriated and properly repurposed—would allow us to finally realize our objectives.

In order to explore this question—and following the work of my former supervisor Himani Bannerji, who writes at the intersection of anti-racism and the critique of ideological thought—I consider discussions about the concept “occupation” within the Occupy movement and read these against a firsthand account of the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz written by a participant in the action, Adam Fortunate Eagle. Based on my reading of these discussions and of movement events, I conclude that, despite (or, indeed, perhaps because of) its association with conquest, “occupation” should be considered a central category of political thought. As such, it should not be supplanted by purportedly antithetical terms like “decolonization,” which—in movement discussions—have often been deployed without reference to a clear or programmatic positive content.

I am particularly interested in feedback on: 1) the case studies I draw upon, 2) the effectiveness of my methodological choice to focus on the type and character of activist statements, and 3) the theoretical viability of my reliance on Carl Schmitt’s definition of “the political.”

My objective is to publish a version of this piece in a peer-reviewed social-movements journal and to publish another, shorter version of it, in an activist context.

Thanks,
AK Thompson
“Occupation” Between Conquest and Liberation

By AK Thompson

The short-lived Occupy movement was remarkable for many reasons. Whether one considers the speed with which its proclamations against American kleptocracy spread, the ability of movement participants to fuse radical insights to populist sentiments, or the alarming rate at which the movement ultimately succumbed to recuperation, there’s little doubt that Occupy signaled an important shift in the tempo and character of street-level politics in America. However, alongside these and other remarkable aspects, the movement also highlighted the importance of political concepts. Most significant among these was the concept of occupation itself—a term that has sparked many fierce debates that, up until now, have remained unresolved.

Such contests are important, since political engagement is indissolubly bound to the conceptual organization of the world. More fundamental than the “frames” of frame analysis, political concepts are the key to understanding how and why collective actors come to act in the way that they do. Because concepts turn “things” into “objects,” they enable both matter and relations to become perceptible as building material and thus susceptible to the transformative force of sensuous human activity. Considering politics as a specialized field of human action that nevertheless remains inseparable from the more general field of human labor, it becomes clear that the role of political concepts is in fact homologous to the role assigned to imagination in Marx’s description of the human labor process.¹

The rapid diffusion of Occupy encampments during the fall of 2011 attests to the fact that “occupation” became a generative concept for activists across America and—indeed—around the world. Still, though there has been no shortage of discussion about the term’s meaning and implications, there has thus far been little agreement about what it actually denotes. On this basis, we might imagine that its resonance owes precisely to its conceptual indeterminacy. Considering the Romantic enthusiasm of Occupy—movement predecessors (and here we need look no further than the activists who partook in the 2008 and 2009 occupations of the New School), it’s hard to ignore the ease with which “occupation” can become a kind of wish image, a vision of the liberated future that impels people to act—but how, and on what basis?

¹ Karl Marx. Capital, Volume I, Chapter VII

² According to Walter Benjamin, “corresponding in the collective consciousness to the forms of the new means of production ... are images in which the new is intermingled with the old... These tendencies direct the visual imagination, which has been activated by the new, back to the primeval past. In the dream in which, before the eyes of each epoch, that which is to follow appears in images, the latter appears wedded to elements from prehistory, that is, of a classless society” (1978:148). In the case of occupation as a political tactic, the new capitalist organization of space (with its dead and transitory zones) seems to prompt recollections of a time—perhaps mythic—when it was possible to collectively gather in order to constitute a coherent “we.”
By definition, a wish image does not contain answers to such questions. Consequently, answers have to be found elsewhere. Drawing on Mao (or maybe, sadly, Tyler Durden) and writing as The Imperative Committee, some New School occupiers issued a manifesto in 2009 proposing that, as far as they were concerned, “an occupation is not a dinner party, writing an essay, or holding a meeting.” Instead, it was “a car bomb” (2009: 3). Conceived as the prelude to a messianic rupture in the base immediacy of capitalist time, it therefore followed that “the coming occupations will have no end in sight” (2009:12).

And maybe they won’t. But such pronouncements were not enough to keep the New School occupation from ending, from succumbing to recuperation and returning to normal. Nevertheless, the Romantic wish fulfillment did not subside. A little more than two years later—as Occupy Wall Street began showing signs of being marked by what George Katsiaficas (1987) has dubbed “the Eros effect”—Conor Tomás Reed proclaimed in the movement-based journal Tidal that, “for many of us, ‘occupy’ has become a verb to be sung.” This desire owed to the fact that the word itself, when wielded by the right people and directed by the right aim, seemed to turn the world upside down.

This rowdy crowd word, at once descriptive and prescriptive, aims to body-flip the logic of imperialism on its head. A radical people’s occupation of public space doesn’t erect checkpoints; it tears them down. Instead of usurping others’ resources, we heartily pool our own for free distribution. (2011: 4)

Visions of absolute inversion such as these are neither new nor unique to Occupy. From Mikhail Bakhtin’s celebration of the medieval carnival (1984) to Naomi Klein’s observation that the movement against corporate globalization “responds to corporate concentration with a maze of fragmentation; to globalisation with its own kind of localisation; to power consolidation with radical power dispersal” (2000), the idea that struggle turns the world upside down by negating it has been an enduring feature of radical thought.3

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3 The scriptural account of the riots caused in Thessalonica by Apostles proclaiming the divinity of the crucified Christ is among the earliest iterations of this phenomenon: “Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few. But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things. And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go.” (Acts 17:1-9)
But while many movement participants were mesmerized by such a promise, others took issue with the new focus on “occupation.” For these activists, because the concept seemed inseparable from the acts of conquest it was thought to normally denote (indeed, even Reed’s celebratory comments—cited above—suggest an awareness of such possible associations), it followed that liberatory efforts proceeding under its banner would inevitably fail. It was therefore hardly surprising that, barely one week into Occupy Wall Street, statements began appearing on the Internet calling attention to the fact that the new movement had failed to properly address the colonial occupation that wrote America’s origin story into the annals of human history in letters of blood and fire.

Discussions of this problem were greatly influenced by the contributions of Indigenous writer and activist Jessica Yee, who published what would become a widely circulated article on Racialicious in late September of 2011. In Yee’s estimation, the fact that the new movement had encouraged “organizers, protesters, and activists” to “‘occupy’ different places that symbolize greed and power” signaled its insensitivity to the fact that “THE UNITED STATES IS ALREADY BEING OCCUPIED.” She went on to clarify: “THIS IS INDIGENOUS LAND. And it’s been occupied for quite some time now.”

In response to the movement’s careless framing, Yee enjoined protesters to consider how, instead of “more occupation,” what was needed was “decolonization.” Moreover, since “COLONIALISM AFFECTS EVERYONE,” it was in everyone’s interest to participate in its undoing. This was all the more true since, by her reckoning, “colonialism also leads to capitalism, globalization, and industrialization.” “How,” she asked, “can we truly end capitalism without ending colonialism?”

Though trifling concerns might be raised with aspects of her characterization, Yee’s call to supplant occupation with decolonization gained broad support in many cities. In the best interpretations, her call was read not to much as an injunction to shut down movement operations as a plea to deepen them by locating the primary contradiction of American experience. Thus it was that, by November 2011, activists began raising motions and supporting initiatives to help the movement address the founding violence of colonial occupation. On December 4, 2011, members of Occupy Oakland’s People of

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4 As the authors of the POC National Statement restated in their April 24, 2012 open letter to the Occupy movement, “Liberation through occupation is impossible.” The first of several programmatic points, it is immediately followed by: “Occupation is a failed political strategy.”

5 The transition from feudalism to capitalism was indeed facilitated by colonization; however, this does not mean that capitalist dynamics were not already actively developing under feudalism. As Marx notes in his comments on primitive accumulation in Capital Volume I: “Although we come across the first beginnings of capitalist production as early as the 14th or 15th century, sporadically, in certain towns of the Mediterranean, the capitalistic era dates from the 16th century.” In this periodization, the onset of the capitalist mode of production actually predates the conquest of the Americas. And while the primitive accumulation made possible through colonization intensified capitalistic production to the point of making it socially dominant, the impulse to conquest arose from a logic that was already implicitly capitalistic. For this reason, Yee’s formulation should be revised so that modern colonialism’s origins are attributed to nascent capitalist tendencies within the feudal era. As for “industrialization,” her analysis stands.
Color caucus put forward a motion to drop “Occupy” and adopt “Decolonize Oakland” as their banner. Their proposal read in part: “We want to open our movement to even greater participation.”

For many of us, including our local native communities, the terms ‘occupy’ and ‘occupation’ echo our experiences under colonial domination and normalizes the military occupations that the U.S. is supporting in places such as Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan. (2011)

Activists speaking in favor of the motion proposed that the change would allow the movement to gain greater traction in communities affected by conquest and that this in turn would help to make actions more effective. Although a slim majority of participants in that night’s General Assembly voted in favor of the motion, the GA’s commitment to consensus meant that the motion itself did not pass. Nevertheless, transcripts of the discussion that took place at that meeting reveal a great deal about the proposal’s resonance.  

According to one participant, “the historical context of ‘occupy’ doesn’t fit with the goals of this movement.” According to another, “the term occupy is racist” and, as a result, “few people of color are involved” in the movement. Speaking in favor of the motion, one participant reported how, “as a Jewish person,” they could not “support Palestinian people in a movement named ‘Occupy.’” Another activist expressed concern that, by “using the language of our oppressors,” the movement would be fundamentally “weakened.”

Such sentiments were not unique to Oakland. In Toronto, where I was based for most of the movement’s encampment phase, many of the themes raised at the Oakland General Assembly found broad and consistent expression. Speaking at a public forum two months after the eviction of Toronto’s Occupy encampment at St. James Park in the early morning of November 23, 2011, Indigenous Environmental Network organizer Clayton Thomas Mueller joined the ranks of those calling for the movement to change its name by pointing out that “no Native person ever called this movement ‘occupy’ and certainly no Palestinian ever did” (2012).

For their part, Baltimore-based movement authors Lester Spence and Mike McGuire conceded that the term “occupation” must have seemed self-evidently “progressive” to the editors at the Canadian-based culture-jamming magazine Adbusters who first issued the call to Occupy Wall Street. Moreover, “to the extent the fight against financial capital is a war, the term also emphasized the fundamental nature of the struggle.” Nevertheless,  

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6 Some commentators have observed that opposition to the resolution came primarily from white participants; however, to the great dismay of many activists, Boots Riley of The Coup spoke in opposition to the proposal as well. This led to an interesting exchange on the "name change" question that has subsequently been broadly circulated and commented upon on the Internet. It can be found here: http://disoccupy.wordpress.com/page/2/
the authors point out, “the term also has a deeply regressive meaning” since “it denotes … white settler colonialism” (2012: 56-57). Consequently, they conclude by exhorting “future iterations” of the movement to “use symbols that reflect the realities of settler colonialism and refrain from using language that denotes ‘occupation.’” (2012: 63).

As a strategic proposition concerned with base building along the broadest lines possible, Spence and McGuire’s recommendation seems to make infinite sense. Nevertheless, activist efforts to “rename” the Occupy movement tended to be met with considerable resistance by movement participants. No doubt this owed in part to the movement’s still-considerable racism; however, it’s worth considering how the reluctance to rename the movement might also have arisen from the inadequacy of the proposed alternatives. If the movement’s normative conception of “occupation” was both overly Romantic and insensitive to the historical dynamics of conquest that the term also invoked, the call to “decolonize” (Yee) tended to lack the “descriptive and prescriptive” (Reed) clarity of “occupation” as a “progressive” tactic of “war” (Spence and McGuire)—and, hence (and following Clausewitz), of politics itself.

Given this indeterminacy, it’s therefore not surprising that the status of “occupation” as a political concept remained unresolved throughout the movement’s encampment phase. In Toronto, this ambivalence was acute and was given concrete expression through a series of amendments made to a sign affixed outside the gazebo located at the center of Saint James Park throughout the course of the occupation.

Here, we can see how an “OCCUPY TORONTO” sign was transformed through the addition of the prefix “DE,” probably in an effort to make clear that the action needed to unsettle (or at very least not reiterate) the centuries-long settler-colonial occupation that stood as Canada’s condition of possibility. Subsequently, someone else (probably dissatisfied with the ambiguities associated with defining movements negatively) circled the prefix “DE” and crossed it out. Finally, another activist, perhaps recognizing the futility of the exchange (and perhaps inspired by Deee-Lite, that gleeful one-hit wonder
from the early ‘90s who came up with “Groove Is In the Heart”), made a subsequent amendment to the prefix so that the sign would finally enjoin people to “(DEE) OCCUPY TORONTO.” Oh, “He’s not vicious or malicious / Just de-lovely and delicious…”

On the surface, such a resolution seems to be both tragically misguided and profoundly racist. For those committed to furthering and fostering anti-colonial initiatives, and in the context of the game’s high stakes, the obvious response thus seems to be: stand behind the disavowed term and work to normalize it. Nevertheless, when considering the problem from the standpoint of the political concepts themselves, it remains necessary to determine whether the claim that the terminological and tactical use of “occupation” will inevitably reiterate colonial relations is in fact well founded.

Returning to Yee’s comments recounted above and considering them more closely, it’s possible to identify two important rhetorical gestures. First, by virtue of their common nomenclature, the occupations carried out by Occupy movement are rendered as conceptual equivalents to the occupation that marked the onset of colonialism in the Americas. Second, and following logically from the first, “occupation” as a political strategy is posited as the logical antithesis of decolonization, which is in turn held to be the only logical and liberatory response to the founding violence of occupation. It’s significant that, while the tactical repertoire associated with “occupation” is briefly considered (e.g. occupying places that “symbolize greed and power”), no such repertoire gets elaborated with respect to decolonization.

These rhetorical moves will be familiar to many observers of contemporary activist struggles. Indeed, they are symptomatic of conceptual habits that are now pervasive within America’s social movement left. Most evident in movement discussions about violence, such habits usually lead discussion participants to note what our enemy does and then proposing that—as a reflection of our opposition to their rule—we will do the exact opposite. Here, resistance is envisioned as a process of logical conceptual negation, of siding with the representational antithesis of the thing we oppose. “They have power,” says Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz; “we won’t touch it with a ten-foot pole.” (1992: 24).

Such conceptual habits are troubling. Our opposition to militarism does not require that we disavow “class war” any more than our insistence that picket lines mean “don’t cross” prevents us from defending abortion clinics from placard-wielding zealots. But while we can recognize that terminological identity with our enemies does not make us “the same” in these instances, it has been much harder for movement participants to accept the same with respect to occupation. This is troubling for at least two reasons. First, it ignores

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important historical evidence indicating that American radicals have often actively embraced occupation as both a term and a tactic for explicitly antiracist and anti-colonial actions. Second, and more fundamentally, it fails to recognize the centrality of occupation to all forms of political action (whether these actions are carried out in the name of conquest or liberation) and, indeed, to politics itself.

And so, while I can understand the strategic importance of name change initiatives like those that activists sought to carry out within the occupy movement, and while I concur that foregrounding anti-colonial struggles is important at a time when many movement participants remain unaware of the central role played by primitive accumulation in the constitution and reproduction of capitalist rule, I worry that the manner in which these efforts have been carried out thus far has produced a kind of analytic confusion that may be deleterious to subsequent movement development.

In order to address this problem, I want to revisit a moment in which Indigenous activists in the United States actively used “occupation” as a political weapon in their struggle against colonial conquest. Specifically, I want to consider the 1969-1971 occupation of Alcatraz Island by the San-Francisco-based group Indians of All Tribes. In order to convey this story, I will hew closely to the published account provided by movement participant Adam Fortunate Eagle in his autobiographical history of the event (1992). Following this case study (and following logically from it), I will take a closer look at “occupation” as a political concept in order to demonstrate that it is in fact impossible to conceive of any politics—whether of conquest or of liberation—that does not take occupation as one of its central attributes.

In advancing this case, it’s not my goal to exonerate the Occupy movement or to dismiss the efforts of those who struggled to guide it in the direction of a more resolutely anti-colonial politics. Nor is it my goal to propose that the case of Alcatraz is in some sense unique. What I do want to do, however, is to highlight how the language we use to describe our political reality directly affects how we conceive of our struggles. In the case or a word like “occupation,” which we associate strongly with oppressors, we sometimes have difficulty imagining how it might be applied in a positive way to our own practice. Nevertheless, such terms remain useful in clarifying what’s required of us in order to win.

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8 The actions—including the occupations—of the recent Indigenous-led Idle No More movement have done more to foreground these issues than any internal debate about decolonization ever managed to do within the Occupy movement. It’s perhaps for this reason that eco-journalist Bill McKibben declared that Idle No More should be viewed as Occupy—“but with deep deep roots” (2013).

9 The joint SDS and Black Power occupation of Columbia University could be analyzed in much the same way. In 1968, Columbia began pursuing plans to build a gymnasium in Morningside Park. It was a plan that would deprive Harlem residents of much-needed green space and further the university’s real-estate encroachment into Harlem and the Morningside Park area. Accordingly, Black Power militants like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown identified the university’s plans as an act of imperialism. In April of 1968, Black Power militants rallied community members and Black students to join with members of Students for a Democratic Society to protest the development. According to Stefan Bradley, the occupation of university buildings by SDS and Students Afro-American Society members dramatically transformed Columbia’s relationship to Harlem and put a halt to its most predatory real estate practices (2009).
Almost immediately, it becomes evident that the positive content of the abstract but necessary injunction to “decolonize” is in fact—occupation. This is because all struggles around productive relations and, at their limit, the relation to the land are the fundament of all politics. It’s therefore not surprising that, in the opening salvo to “Since Predator Came,” Ward Churchill described the Indigenous inhabitants of North America as “having continuously occupied the continent for at least 50,000 years.” Reasserting Indigenous sovereignty (e.g. decolonization) therefore means ending one occupation and resuming another along different lines, with a different “we,” and for different ends.

Between 1969 and 1971, several hundred Indigenous activists occupied Alcatraz Island on a rotating basis. As Adam Fortunate Eagle recounts, their bid was not only to have their treaty rights recognized but also to create a new kind of Indigenous society based on new associations and new practices. The legal struggle with the State was thus leveraged to facilitate a political struggle in the most fundamental sense: determine who we are, determine what territory we operate within, and determine what social relations will obtain therein.

Carried out by the cross-nation coalition Indians of All Tribes, the occupation was inspired by a stunt pulled five years earlier by a much smaller group of Sioux activists who staged a “takeover” of the island in 1964. Citing a treaty from 1868, which stated that the Sioux were entitled to repossess lands used by the United States for bases and other purposes once these installations had been declared “surplus,” the activists’ stunt—though it lasted less than a day, and though it was ultimately dismissed as being without legal merit—nevertheless underscored the centrality of territory and people to politics. These lessons were learned through “takeover”—a kind of premature but pedagogically useful form of micro-sovereign contestation that effectively illuminated the terrain of politics.

The lesson resonated. As Fortunate Eagle recounts, “Alcatraz was a powerful symbol.” Nevertheless, the significance of 1969’s occupation owed to the fact that the organizers also thought the island had “enough facilities to give it some real potential.” In other words, their objective was not simply to hold the space (whether symbolically, as their Sioux predecessors had done, or concretely, by just being there) but to produce something with and within it: As Fortunate Eagle recounts, the hope was that the island’s territorial and infrastructural potential could be used to “galvanize the urban Indian community and reach out to the Indians on the reservation” (1992: 39).

In this way, the action’s political character became clear: sovereign claims to the island would be used to bring together fragmented Indigenous populations that could subsequently be used to seize territory and determine the social relations—including the productive relations—that might obtain therein. On this basis, the planning began:

We developed our ideas of the practical, historical, and political reasons why Alcatraz should become Indian, and what exactly we would do with it. All of our
thoughts were later incorporated into proclamations made at the takeover. (1992: 39)

Reflecting on his experience as an active participant in the movement more than 20 years later, Fortunate Eagle makes some wry observations about the apparent homology between the actions of Indians of All Tribes and the colonial conquest of the Americas. “I guess the roots of the occupation were first framed when Columbus set foot on an island in the Caribbean,” he proclaimed. Moreover, “I think if the Indians of that island had made as much fuss as the government of the United States did about the island of Alcatraz, we wouldn’t have had the problems that forced us to invade.” This insight leads to a stunning conclusion: “Maybe we Indians could learn something about holding onto our land and making guests feel unwelcome.”

Yet perhaps we did learn something from what happened after Columbus landed on that island, because, in a way, the same also happened out on “the Rock.” Nobody really expected us to be that persistent, and certainly no one expected us to stay very long. (1992: 14)

Despite being a member of the “local native communities” referred to by the Occupy Oakland People of Color Caucus in the preamble to their motion, the “echo” of “colonial domination” in the terms “occupy” and “occupation” was, for Fortunate Eagle, a valuable political discovery. How else are we to understand the fact that he goes on to describe the activists that landed on Alcatraz as “the occupying force” and to refer to their arrival as “the takeover” (1992: 54).

The homology can be extended. Despite pronouncements such as those by Conor Tomás Reed, mentioned earlier, that “a radical people’s occupation of public space doesn’t erect checkpoints” but “tears them down” (2011: 4), Hannah Dobbs reports that Indians of All Tribes secured Alcatraz by, among other things, painting “giant ‘no trespassing’ signs, including one that read … ‘Warning Keep Off Indian Property’” (2012:24).

Based on these accounts, we might say that, regardless of the practice’s apparent self-evidence today, positing resistance as the conceptual negation of the terms used by the oppressor was not yet hegemonic in 1969 (or even in 1992, when Fortunate Eagle published his reflections; or even among “local native communities,” despite the fact that these groups would come to be viewed as being among those most allergic to terms like “occupation”). Despite the undeniably comic dimension to his comparisons, Fortunate Eagle’s comments reveal the extent to which it makes good conceptual sense to view both struggles of conquest and of liberation on the same terminological plane. This is true despite the formal differences in the precise tactical repertoires adopted by—and the objectives motivating—the opposing forces.

If politics is about determining who “we” are, what terrain we operate within, and what social relations will obtain therein, it makes sense that the occupation of Alcatraz, which
brought together participants from a variety of Indigenous nations, also helped to conceptually fashion a new “we,” a new people. As Carl Schmitt explains, politics is predicated upon “the distinction of friend and enemy.” Here, the political enemy is “existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible” (1996: 26-27). Based on this formulation, the goal of politics thus becomes: repulsing one’s opponent’s way of life “in order to preserve one’s own form of existence” (1996: 27). Although tainted by his association with fascism, Schmitt’s formulation is nevertheless instructive when considering anti-colonial encounters.

Fortunate Eagle describes how, through the process of deliberation, activists finally “agreed on a name we could use to structure the occupying force and sign the proclamations—‘Indians of All Tribes’” (1992: 43). Apart from his telling reference to the Indigenous activists as an “occupying force,” Fortunate Eagle’s testimony highlights how the advent of a new political space is predicated on the constitution of a new political collectivity—a “mode of existence,” to use Carl Schmitt’s apt but misunderstood phrase.10

Once landed, Indians of All Tribes declared: “We, the native Americans, re-claim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery” (1992: 44). Though the proclamation’s gestural mimesis was no doubt meant to be humorous, this should not prevent us from recognizing its important political insights. For one, the “we” that did the reclaiming amounted to a new people—a group that came together through reclamation and would not likely have emerged without it.

Moreover, by making the claim on behalf of “all American Indians,” the occupiers effectively erased prior national divisions in order to conceptually extend the boundaries of their “we” (an act that—at its best—would produce a practically mimetic situation rather than a representation one in the conventional sense). Moreover, by appealing to the “right of discovery” and thus drawing on a European colonial legal contrivance to legitimize their possession, Indians of All Tribes demonstrated that the actualization of sovereign claims necessarily required that the claims of others be rendered inoperative.

The Indians of All Tribes proclamation goes on to enumerate the uses to which the island will be put. Significantly, all proposed uses concerned the development of the Indian people’s “mode of existence”, including: a center for Native American Studies, an American Indian spiritual center, an Indian Center for Ecology, a Great Indian training school, and—finally—an American Indian museum. Within this context marked by sovereign assertion, it was not surprising that Fortunate Eagle was struck by the

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10 It’s noteworthy that, while Schmitt’s analysis of politics and sovereignty presuppose the nation state as the base, mythological, unit for the elaboration of modes of existence, the logic of his category can be applied equally well (and perhaps more accurately) to contests within the nation state. Within nation-states, the most extreme form of friend-enemy grouping and the most logical form of sovereign usurpation take the form of civil war. By dispensing with Schmitt’s fascist mythology, it becomes evident that the most universal contest between different “forms of existence” concerns the war between parasites and producers, e.g. class war.
similarities between the actions of Indians of All Tribes and of those who had been implicated in the initial conquest of the Americas. “What a strange turnabout of history, I thought. Here were nearly 50 Indians on an old sailing vessel, heading out to seek a new way of life for their people.”

I thought of the Mayflower and its crew of Pilgrims who had landed on our shores 350 years earlier. The history books say they were seeking new freedom for themselves and their children, freedom denied them in their homeland. It didn’t matter that Plymouth Rock already belonged to somebody else; that was not their concern. What did concern them was their own fate and their own hopes. What a sad commentary on this country that we, the original inhabitants, were forced to make a landing 350 years later on another rock, the rock called Alcatraz, to focus national attention on our own struggle to regain the same basic freedom. (1992: 56)

Alcatraz marked a watershed moment in Indigenous struggles in the United States. As Troy R. Johnson reports, there were more than 65 major Indigenous occupations or actions in support of occupations in the period between 1969 and 1975. Many of these actions, which involved occupying abandoned military bases, explicitly mixed the struggle for legal recognition with the struggle to create new forms of Indigenous life along post-national lines. To get a sense of the scope and political character of these actions, it’s useful to briefly survey a few of them.

Citing the 1868 Sioux treaty right to occupy former Indian lands scheduled by the government to be declared “surplus,” United Indians of All Tribes occupied Fort Lawton on March 8, 1970. According to Johnson, “Indians from Alcatraz Island made up the majority of the occupation force” (1996: 223). On the same date, 14 activists also occupied Fort Lewis, Washington (1996: 224). On April 2, 1970, another attempt was made to occupy Fort Lawton. According to occupation participant Bernie Whitebear, “Alcatraz was very much a catalyst to our occupation here. We saw what could be achieved there, and if it had not been for their determined effort at Alcatraz, there would have been no movement here” (cited in Johnson 1996: 225).

On May 1, 1970, Rattlesnake Island near Clear Lake California is occupied by Pomo Indians who claim it as a burial ground. Against the objections of the lumber company then claiming title to the land, they are “allowed” to stay. (1996: 225-226). On May 9, 1970, approximately 70 Mohawks from the St. Regis Indian Reservation occupy Stanley Island in the St. Lawrence River, posted a “no trespassing” sign and reclaimed the island along with its nine-hole golf course (1996: 226). According to Ward Churchill, on May 13, 1974, “Mohawks from St. Regis and Canghawaga [Kahnawake]” partook in a similar action when they “occupied an area at Ganiewkeh [Moss Lake], in the Adirondak Mountains.” After declaring the site to be “sovereign Mohawk territory under the Fort Stanwix treaty,” they “set out to defend it (and themselves) by force of arms” (1996: 64).
Such examples suggest that, rather than being decolonization’s antithesis, occupation has historically been a central tactic in the struggle to achieve it. To be sure, the occupations considered here were all carried out by Indigenous activists struggling to reassert their sovereign claim on stolen lands. Nevertheless, each of these occupations was marked by the political possibility that a new “we” might form within a newly conceived territory and, through the process, realize a new “mode of existence.” The prelude to such realization—which, if we follow the history of anti-colonial struggles, tends to move quickly beyond national lines and toward the expression of more universal liberatory claims—is the usurpation of constituted sovereign power. The fight to determine what life might look like must first pass through the fight with those who currently claim a monopoly on such determinations.

The Occupy movement was comprised primarily of settlers and often revealed a lack of awareness concerning the violence of America’s colonial past. Nevertheless, at their most realized, its occupations amounted to micro-sovereign contestations aimed at usurping constituted power’s territorial control. Based on the case studies presented here, it becomes clear that, today, politics either takes place under occupation or it takes place as occupation. Consequently, occupations of conquest can only be undone through occupations of liberation. To be sure, the distinction between the two modes may manifest itself in the tactical realm; however, what is most important in drawing the distinction is to emphasize the modes of existence that each occupation enables. In the case of occupations of conquest, the modes of existence that emerged historically have corresponded to the needs of oppressor classes defined by a tendency toward social parasitism.

The occupations that emerged in the fall of 2011 reveal that, even amongst the most privileged, there are now considerable misgivings with the so-called benefits of this mode of existence. And while these misgivings have not always been traced back to their point of origin, they have nevertheless raised a challenge to what we might think of—following Weber—as the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of occupation. In this way, the Occupy movement’s occupations prefigured a challenge to sovereign power that, despite their evident shortcomings, nevertheless opened a new and valuable space for Indigenous struggles. The recent Idle No More movement suggests that this opportunity was not lost.
Works Cited


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