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Populism from below?

Occupy, 'the 99%' and the problem with representation

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The current moment is often characterised as one of resurgent populism. The figure of 'the people' is invoked by a variety of its would-be representatives, often in the explicitly representational arena of electoral politics, and most successfully - it seems - by those on the right. But what of the mobilisations from below that marked the first unravelling of consensus following the financial crisis? How did the occupation movements express alternative visions of the populist challenge, and how did this clash and collide with the anti-capitalism and radical democratic desires that also drove those movements? What can they tell us about the limits of a grassroots populism?

My engagement with these questions developed through three years of ethnographic fieldwork with Occupy London, a movement in which I was a participant before I was a researcher. Movement actors are frequently involved in intensive reflexivity, as complex ideological and philosophical issues are encountered as concrete practical problems. Moving with Occupy London long past the phase of urban protest camps (October 2011 until June 2012), and through a long post-eviction landscape of reinvigorations, fresh challenges and eventual breakdown, one defining tension centred on its iconic slogan 'We are the 99%'.

Beneath the apparent simplicity of the slogan – which had originated in Occupy Wall Street and was enthusiastically translated to Occupy London – was a tension between two contradictory visions of politics. On the one hand, the slogan was the centrepiece of a populist orientation, in which 'the 99%' was the great 'people' rising against a delegitimized, proportionately tiny establishment. However, this implied a dynamic of representation ('the people' largely invoked by those claiming to speak in its name) that was potentially troubling in a movement whose emphasis on direct democratic decision-making and direct action tactics reflected a privileging of collective agency, and rejection of mediation by corruptible others. Within this latter orientation, 'the 99%' did not refer to a grand collective at all, but instead named the fact of inequality; a critique of a system that produces exploitation and subjection as the condition of our lives.

This latter, non-identitarian tendency in Occupy's '99%' discourse was expressed well by one participant, Maria: 'I think "the 99%" more than anything else shows the inequality of power, and

economic inequality, in which we live, in our society and globally'. Distancing herself from its potentially representational inflection, Maria continued, '[i]t didn't necessarily mean that we... it was a way of expressing the unfairness of the system'. This insistence on designating a 'system', not a collective identity, reveals a sensitivity to the slogan's potential as a critical interruption in the post-crash austerity landscape; one seeking to mobilise diverse individuals and groups who could see their condition named in the truth of the slogan. This mode of dispersal and differentiation was certainly most significant in Occupy's earlier days, when the command to 'Occupy!' was answered in the international proliferation of encampments that, between them, offered a glimpse of the vast social distribution of the '99%' problematic. Its uneven distribution, vis-a-vis 'race' and social class in particular, warrants further reflection; it was certainly an important marker of the limitations of the Occupy moment.

The other – populist – tendency was already implicit in the framing of the '99%/1%' antagonism, but perhaps more importantly it invoked an already acceptable idea of movement legitimation – 'listen to us, we speak for the people' – which fit with liberal democratic common-sense. This was shared by many among the significant proportion of Occupiers for whom this was a first experience of activism and street politics, and who therefore did not necessarily share the critique of representation fostered across prior waves of radical mobilisations. As one participant, Joe, put it, '[w]e have a completely unjust, unsustainable financial system. The 1% are the people who profit, the 99% are the people who suffer'. Many expressed a desire for 'unity' that sometimes risked subsuming important social differences (see the critique by Baltimore black feminist collective W&TCH of Occupy's homogenising tendencies [<https://libcom.org/library/communique-recent-occupations>]). What then was the purported relationship between this great populist '99%' and the mobilised Occupiers? As more than one participant put it, Occupy was 'the voice of the people'. Clearly in such moments we are far from the principled rejection of representation.

The tension between these two poles dramatized wider debates regarding populism in radical political theory and activism. The neo-Gramscian work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe has been among the most cited in discussions of left populisms in places like Spain and Greece. Their insistence that populism is not a concrete *ideology*, but a *logic* – invoking 'the people' and an antagonist 'power' – seeks to work with the centrality of ideals of popular sovereignty within democratic discourses. Elsewhere, the progressive potential of 'the people' has been problematized, as in the works of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who argue that any claim to the sovereign people is always an illegitimate usurpation, and an attempt to crush difference under the heel of a dominant will. While this latter view had resonated with the decentralised networked politics of the global justice movement at the turn of the millennium, a key antecedent for Occupy, the movements that followed the 2007-8 crash have sometimes been characterised as a partial return to aspirations of popular unity.

In Occupy London, the dispute between these opposing political modes was made particularly clear in Occupiers' navigation of the controversial language of 'representation'. When pushed to explain the relationship between Occupy London and the imagined '99%', many were stuck. On the one hand,

they recognised the potential problems of the claim to 'represent' them. But on the other, that was the closest term they could find. This stages important theoretical distinctions in understandings of representation. First, it reflects Gayatri Spivak's clarification [<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/Spivak%2520CanTheSubalternSpeak.pdf>] (via Marx [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>]) of the difference between representation as symbolic portrait, and representation as the 'speaking for' of political proxies. Second, it reminds us that representation is never the straightforward transfer from one clearly defined thing to another – the represented to the representative – but that so-called representation is always, in part, the production of the represented. Especially in the realm of transformative politics, apparent representations are trying to performatively produce the possibilities and publics they describe.

Nowhere was this clearer than in Occupy's movement-defining practice of assembly. By this I mean not so much the use of decision-making assemblies, but rather the ethos of assembling an ever-larger mobilised mass in the occupied squares. The site of representation aspired to ongoing permeation by the represented, and this emphasis on assembly meant the frustration of any clear distinction between an inside and outside. The claim to speaking for others was essentially inadmissible, but the camps were an unavoidable representative portrait – an image of an amassing people in process. Through this dynamic process, Occupy maintained the biting point of a critical tension between the opposing tendencies of 'the 99%'.

But this could not last. The dream of perpetual amassing was an effect of the sometimes frenzied enthusiasm that had emerged from Occupy's explosive beginnings, which seemed particularly unprecedented to those new to activist life. This was highly motivating, but seriously scuppered attempts to plan for the future, with many unable to accept the prospect of an approaching end-point to this powerful, but inevitably fleeting phase. Indeed, the sense of having ever been the assembling 'people' had always depended on the distorted perspective from within the crowd, in what Alain Badiou has called the 'intensity of compact presence'. As numbers dwindled and Occupiers encountered, in their demonstrations, a spectating audience of people that would never join the movement, the cry of 'We are the 99%' sounded increasingly senseless. The slogan ultimately fell out of use.

Looking back from our current political moment, we not only recognise the centrality of some populist expression amidst the tectonic disruptions of the post-crash period, we also see how this ran up against opposing left imaginaries within the concrete everyday life of a movement on the go. 'The 99%', as a discourse and field of practice, represented a significant critical engagement with the populist problem: first, through the practice of assembly that sought, imperfectly, to overcome the people's most troubling aspects; second, in insisting that the condition of life of that people is one of inequality. We should take seriously the critique of representation and 'the people', while also recognising their inescapability in the symbolic realm of political life. The question that will recur – especially given the institutional turn in the anti-austerity left under the broad signifier 'Corbynism' –

is whether more lasting progressive projects can find ways to sustain not only a narrative of populist antagonism but also a material critique of the bodies, subjectivities and forms of life proposed by neoliberal capitalism.

Read more about this research in Jamie's article: Matthews, J. (2019). Populism, inequality and representation: Negotiating 'the 99%' with Occupy London. *The Sociological Review*, 67(5), 1018–1033. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119851648> [<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119851648>]

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