

## Occupy and Academia: Investigating a Socio-Political Laboratory

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### Introduction

In July 2011, the *Adbusters Media Foundation* blogged the famous line: “Are you ready for a Tahrir moment? On Sept 17, flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street.”<sup>1</sup> The protests following this call quickly became known as part of the Occupy movement. They generated world-wide attention and initially enthusiastic reactions, even resulting in claimed parallels with the 1960s movements. In the course of the protests, however, Occupy was subjected to multitudes of analyses negotiating whether its actors were indeed following a coherent purpose and were having a chance to enforce their “one demand.”

Already during the Occupy protests in New York and other cities, one could observe various critical analyses and a swift historization of the movement. In 2012, observations of Occupy quickly turned into practices of remembrance; journalists as well as academics raised the question of why the movement and its protests (sometimes while they were still ongoing) had “no success.”<sup>2</sup>

Even at the peak of the protests, academics such as Slavoj Žižek addressed the protestors of Occupy Wall Street, reflecting on how the movement would be remembered in the future:

“There is a danger. Don’t fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives. Will there be any changes then? I don’t want you to remember these days, you know, like ‘Oh. We were young and it was beautiful.’”<sup>3</sup>

Žižek’s visit and speech at Zuccotti Park is an example of various forms of academic involvement in the Occupy movement. Academics commenting, investigating, and supporting the protests were a key feature of Occupy Wall Street and most of its European offshoots. During our own experience of the Occupy protests in Frankfurt and Berlin, we got the impression that there were as many activists present as there were academics trying to interview or film them, who were investigating and providing material or handing out surveys.

Looking back at Occupy today, we wonder how such academic attention and the resulting analyses may have influenced and constituted the movement; what are the implications for a political movement when it is analysed and academically assessed already during its unfolding? In what ways may the prompt narratives of its development, history, and potential failure have affected the Occupy movement? We are aware that such questions are difficult to assess, and we do not suggest to provide a definite answer regarding this issue. However, we propose this paper as an initiation of a discussion concerned with encounters and relations between activists and academics in contemporary protest movements.

In order to elaborate on the interaction between academic and activist practices related to the Occupy protests, we will firstly discuss how academic interests and involvement have facilitated the protests: what kind of discursive agency and representation have academics “transferred” to the movement? The flipside of this question is how

academic interests—such as the need to generate material and to publish books and papers—may have interfered with its development.

More importantly, we raise the question of which methodological implications the spaces of Occupy raise for research on site. While Occupy attracted the interest of many academics, it seems characteristic of the movement that the actors were active in generating emic (self-reflexive) theories regarding their own practices and were very strategic in the ways they constructed the respective spaces. Therefore, we intend to draw attention to the “artificiality” of the protest spaces, which seem related to the reflexivity and strategic construction of the activist actors themselves.

In order to describe the interactions between academic and activist reflections and involvement, we suggest looking at the spaces of protest not as “fields of research,” but as “socio-political laboratories” which have produced experimental aesthetics and political as well as artistic practices. With this approach we want to initiate a discussion and reflection on (participatory) research methods, which emphasize issues of agency and emic theories when it comes to researching activist practices.

### **Occupy and Academic: Initial Arguments**

Our paper elaborates on the argument that Occupy’s kick-off was accompanied by a keen interest on the part of academics to get involved in the protest movement, that their involvement helped provide the movement with a certain discursive agency and active support. However, since most academics’ interests were not merely founded on activist and political concerns, their involvement began to decline once their academic needs were saturated and the necessary material was acquired. Frank commented on such academic “short-term activism”:

“[A]cademic requirements often seemed to come first. OWS was taken as a proving ground for theory. Its ranks weren’t just filled with professionals and professionals-to-be; far too often the campaign itself appeared to be an arena for professional credentialing.”<sup>4</sup>

Already during the protests, renowned academics such as the aforementioned Slavoj Žižek, David Graeber, and Naomi Klein showed up in the camps, demonstrating their affiliation with the movement and (sometimes) suggesting the appropriateness of their theoretical frameworks.

What one may meanwhile deduce from the amount of academic publications regarding Occupy was already indicated in terms of academics' presence on site. Often by applying participatory research approaches, academics have not only experienced, but also shaped the settings and sometimes—as in the case of David Graeber—programmatically defined the movement's image.<sup>5</sup>

After experiencing the social and spatial constellations of Occupy, it seems that academic interests were intermingled with activist aims. Also, research practices were partly reproducing political practices in order to trigger reactions, which could be potentially fruitful for research.

This led to discrepancies between protest participants as well as activists' suspicion towards academics. Academic self-interest – as opposed to purely politically inspired involvement – was perceived as infiltration of the movement's idealistic aims. Reasons for such a suspicion are, firstly, that capitalist functionalities—making profits by selling books about the movement/gaining prestige in academia—are brought back into play through academic involvement. Secondly, due to the movement's own theoretical reflexivity, academics' interpretations have been seen as redundant and competitive (mis)readings by external observers. In this sense, the movement's self-definition, of its spaces and social settings, appears potentially counteracted by academic assessments.

### **Occupy as Socio-Political Laboratory**

In order to explore potential discrepancies, emerging hierarchies and conflicts between the protest spheres of activists and academics, we propose to conceptualize the protest spaces not as “fields of research,” but rather as socio-political laboratories which have produced experimental

aesthetics and political as well as artistic practices. It is not the case that activists have been living in rather “natural,” established social contexts, but they have been experimenting and constructing these spaces and social formations themselves. From this perspective, it would be a misconception to understand the socio-spatial settings of Occupy as “fields” which can be localized and surveyed. They were rather constructed sites, which served as collaborative laboratories.

### **Field vs. Laboratory**

Karen Knorr-Cetina defines the laboratory (in contrast to the field):

“In the laboratory scientists operate upon (and within) a highly preconstructed artifactual reality. (...) ‘Raw’ materials which enter the laboratory are carefully selected and ‘prepared’ before they are subjected to ‘scientific’ tests. In short, nowhere in the laboratory do we find the ‘nature’ or ‘reality’ which is so crucial to the descriptivist interpretation of inquiry. To the observer from the outside world, the laboratory displays itself as a site of action from which ‘nature’ is as much as possible excluded rather than included.”<sup>6</sup>

We suggest that such a “laboratization” has also taken place in the case of Occupy, and that it was in a sense a “double-laboratization” which has occurred *top-down* as well as *bottom-up*. We speak of “laboratization bottom-up” to indicate practices and artefacts which show that the social and spatial settings of Occupy have been carefully constructed and intentionally shaped by activists. We chose the concept of the laboratory because speaking of fields with regards to such spaces seems to underrate the activists’ reflexivity and falls back into what Latour called a “naïve believe in the naïve believe of the other.”<sup>7</sup> Seeing the sites of Occupy as socio-political laboratories shall therefore also contribute to a perspective on political movement which emphasizes a-hierarchical relations between researching and researched actors as well as an acknowledgement of the latter’s strategic efforts. “Laboratization top-down,” on the other hand, refers to practices which indicated academics’

involvement and their appropriation of the Occupy settings for research purposes.

### **Laboratization: Bottom-Up**

On site, activists intentionally generated and constructed experimental spaces through the combination of material practices and symbolic forms with egalitarian rules of communication and the barter of commodities as well as the production of representations. In sum, they constituted the public image of a more or less unified Occupy movement. The employed strategies and representative images emerged in interaction with the movement's evolving common ideology.

Examples of such a "bottom-up laboratization" are an establishment of *spaces* for communal life and urban visibility; the development of identifying symbols and distinct *sign systems* (particularly in the context of assemblies); strategies of *process/progress control* and *documentation*; and an implementation of (Social) Media as *communication* and *measurement instruments*.

Within the laboratory space of Occupy, urban tent camps played a key role for the formation of the movement by making up an interface for practices, material artefacts, and symbolic forms. Providing the infrastructure for communal living, since most sites included communal kitchens, libraries and media centers, tents were put up as individual living spaces which also referred to the motivation of the protest form as a reaction to high living expenses, lack in affordable living space and property speculations (originating from tent cities in Tel Aviv). But tents were also used for communicative encounters, general discussions, or the crowdsourcing of protest strategies. At the same time, the camps acted as a powerful sign system within the fabric of urban space rendering visible the transformation of public places and—in the case of Occupy Wall Street—private property into a space of collective political action. As institutionalized structures, the camps enabled activists to turn public spaces into spaces of encounters where the affordances for democratic participation surfaced and in doing so lowered the threshold for active involvement.

Similar to the natural science laboratory, the building materials were carefully prepared, selected, and contextualized through negotiation processes by the actors themselves; particular books were integrated in the camps' libraries and symbols and signs were used to show ideological affiliations to the movements' motivations and organizational structure. The camps developed certain forms of self-governance that were in line with common representational aims, but were also contested by individual ideologies. Vegetarian or vegan food? Individual usage of the media tent vs. usage for public relations activities only? Drinking ban or liberal drinking policy? Also, Occupy developed a distinct sign and experty language which has to be learned and appropriated by the members for communal meetings (made explicit in Graeber's guide to Occupy, German version).<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, the activists were encountering confounding factors, contaminations so to speak, as you may also experience them in laboratory studies when, for example, political parties tried to exploit the movement and infiltrated the sites with their own claims and representations. While in general, the involvement of academics like David Graeber were not generally seen as contaminations but rather experienced as part of the bottom-up laboratorization providing intellectual foundation and public support, certain activities were criticised as intellectual and economic exploitation.

### **Laboratization: Top-Down**

While the activist actors constructed spatial settings supposed to support and symbolize their political aims, also academics employed strategies in order to obtain and produce material which could be used for further research. These academics practices during the protests and in their aftermath will be described as "top-down laboratization."

Practices of mediatization and staging of the protests are an obvious first feature. Aiming at the creation of data, academics initiated focus groups on site, handed out surveys, and conducted interviews. These encounters were often filmed or at least recorded. In this sense, situations were

deliberately created on site which altered the camps in a way that made them accessible to academic investigations. Moreover, not merely the physical spaces were appropriated as fruitful site for investigations. Moreover, not merely the physical spaces were appropriated as fruitful sites for investigations: also social media used by the activists were closely monitored and appropriated as tools and access points for academic research.

In particular, it seems that an increasingly fast paced academic publication environment has influenced the way academics and activists interacted during the Occupy protests. Briefly after the OWS kick-off, many well-known academics published (online) articles describing the suitability of their theories and concepts in order to assess the movement's characteristics.<sup>9</sup> Some of these contributions were published with only minimal delay while the protests were still ongoing. This led to some distrust on the part of Occupy protestors who feared that academics were joining the protests not because of political motivations but an interest in insightful observation material. Many of the empirically motivated papers indicate that academics were pursuing a twofold agenda, aiming at an enrichment of their scholarly profile, but nevertheless motivated by sympathy with the activist aims. This seems problematic in the sense that the (not directly commercially worthwhile) academic interest does not always correspond to idealistic, politically-oriented activist aims. It is also questionable what a short-term involvement of academic means for a movement which required a long-term commitment through, for example, living in the camps.

In many cases academics' involvement has surely been motivated by sympathies, maybe even an identification with the movement and a desire for political engagement aside from scholarly engagement. However, at least to some extent, academia also has to account for a functionalization of the protests in favor of validating research hypotheses and adding "a subtle bouquet of career activism."<sup>10</sup> This seems to be an ethical question which also requires academics to reflect on their responsibility and influence on politically motivated movements. Their involvement comes along with an agency, which is lent to the movement for a certain time,



but may be also withdrawn once the analytic insights have been exhausted.

Particularly, reactions to representational activities during Occupy indicate that certain forms of academic involvement may also lead to discrepancies between activists and academics. For example, David Graeber has been criticized in particular for profiting from his involvement in the Occupy movement. The German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* commented on his appearance sarcastically: “And so the stage was open for David Graeber. [...] His arrival in Frankfurt was perfectly timed. He intends to present two books: his report on the Occupy Wall Street movement, *Inside Occupy*, then his main book, 500 pages about debt.”<sup>11</sup>

Graeber’s claimed intersection of being an activist (and anarchist) and an author of profitable publications has led to the severe critique by activists and the sarcasm of journalists and observers. When presenting his books in the middle of the Blockupy European Days of Action in Frankfurt 2012 and later in Cologne and Berlin, Graeber has been asked what he intended to do with the profits from his books and why he had not published any of them under a creative commons license. In another interview a German journalist also inquired how Graeber manages to combine being an anarchist with wearing Ray-Ban glasses.<sup>12</sup> As a reaction to his *Inside Occupy* publication, activists in Berlin even burned the book (a reaction which has been highly disputed among activists afterwards).<sup>13</sup>

These issues raise particularly complex ethical questions regarding the responsibility of a researcher toward the spaces and actors she/he influences. Moreover, when thinking about academics’ involvement, one should keep in mind the implications deriving from a “laboratization bottom-up” which we outlined in the prior section. Once acknowledged that the spaces we investigate are already constructed, designed, and enclosed, one also has to derive methodological implications. Just like the term “field” seems to be misleading when we talk about movements such as Occupy whose actors show a high degree of reflexivity and strategic

acting, also concepts such as “participatory observation” seem questionable.

It seems that scholars do not witness “natural” processes and practices, but their presence is acknowledged and taken into account as part of the setting. The camps and protests have been prepared in order to facilitate public attention and to generate metaphorical meaning. They exert *politics* as described by Rancière:

“Move along! There is nothing to see here!’ The police says that there is nothing to see on a road, that there is nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation. Politics, in contrast, consists in transforming this space of ‘moving-along’ into a space for the appearance of a subject: i.e., the people, the workers, the citizens: It consists in refiguring the space, of what there is to do there, what is to be seen or named therein.”<sup>14</sup>

Such a strategic construction of spaces also implies that academics need to take into account that the scenes and settings they are investigating cannot be treated as fields, but are collaborative laboratories, which entail a high level of reflexivity and strategic implementation. When investigating protest movements, academics (from various disciplinary fields) need to acknowledge the activists’ agency and self-reflexivity in order to prevent their academic involvement from contaminating both those socio-political laboratories and their own research results.

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned initially, this paper intends to initiate a discussion. We do not claim to provide a definitive assessment of the interactions that took place between academic and activist actors during protest movements such as Occupy. Hence, we would like to conclude with a few remarks, which are also meant as a kind of “disclaimer.” What we may derive from a certain hostility towards academics such as David Graeber is that there is a pervasive suspicion among activists that scholars’ motives for

academic involvement and the actual effects of this involvement diverge or even conflict. Hence, the question remains how to evaluate the paradox that academics may profit from their own involvement? That being said, of course, it can be difficult to draw a line between activists and academics. We also need to ask how do we determine whether a person mainly pursues academic or political interests? How can academics ethically account for a blending of their academic and activist interests?

It seems significant in this context that “being political” has been a highly valued feature of academic work on Occupy. This might also be related to the importance of empirical research and “authentic” approaches. A latent side-issue of our paper is therefore the overlap between the roles of the activist and the academic (and vice versa). In the case of Occupy, a strong tendency for self-reflexive, emic theories made by the activists themselves came together with a keen interest of academics to examine scientific theories in practices and appropriate the protests as fruitful and prestigious research topics. Therefore, this paper is implicitly concerned with the implications resulting from the double-role of academics as short-term activists in a political setting.

What one could observe in the case of Occupy is a twofold laboratization. On the one hand, the activists brought about self-reflexive accounts of their own practices and aims. They created spaces and techniques which were meant to serve as publicly visible platforms, communicating and supporting their political aims. On the other hand, academics have investigated, influenced, and analyzed the spaces of the Occupy movement. Thereby academic involvement has not always resulted in controversies, but certain mechanisms within the structure of academic knowledge production and distribution seem to contradict the dynamic character of social movements.

To combine activism and research demands the appreciation of the boundary between a bottom-up laboratization of the actors themselves and the top-down laboratization connected to the academic strive for interpretational sovereignty. However, the combination of activism and research prohibits such an usurpation of collective action. Talking

methodologically, this task calls for a de-stratification of methods to render the voices of the actors audible without patronizing them.

### **Epilogue**

For the first anniversary of the birth of the Occupy Wall Street movement, a guided tour—the Occupy Memory Walk—was offered. It started with a walking tour along former hotspots of the protest, and concluded with a “mapping party.”<sup>15</sup> The Occupy Memory Walk can be described as a historicizing successor of the former bottom-up strategies of laboratization.

Activities like the Occupy Memory Walk account for a rapid historicization of the Occupy movement. Such events leave a somehow tragic impression, since they stand in contrast to the movement’s initial driving force. It also seems that in memorializing the movement, both the “top-down” and “bottom-up” strategies seem to come together. When looking at the leftovers of Occupy and its offshoots, one encounters cultural practices of memorialization which turn the former laboratory into a museum artifact and tourist attraction.

Even before the declared end of Occupy, the Occupy Biennale (April 2012 in Berlin, 7th exhibition on contemporary art) pushed the laboratization and artificial representation of Occupy to its most extreme form. The exhibition chose the protest movement, including its activists, as the main attraction. Besides organizing performance events, an indoor camp was established and extensively decorated with signs and symbols that had been identified as visual signifiers for Occupy and its leftist affiliation: Marx, Che Guevara, appropriate posters and slogans, stencil art, and urban gardening. Even the activists were invited which gave the camp not only the feel of a laboratory filled with compounds, but was inevitably reminiscent of a human zoo.

However, even in such obviously artificial settings, one was trying to assert a claim to a natural formation of the field, denying the laboratory style of presentation. Artur Zmijewski, curator and video artist assured his audience optimistically during a press conference that the activists

living at the Berliner KW Institute for Contemporary Art: “They do whatever they want.”

## Notes

- 1 “#OCCUPYWALLSTREET A shift in revolutionary tactics,” *Adbusters.org*, 13 July 2011 [www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html](http://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html). Briefly afterwards, the iconic poster, showing a ballerina on the charging bull was published. It contained the likewise famous line: “What is our one demand? #occupywallstreet September 17th. Bring tent”.
- 2 See Jeff Madrick, “The Fall and Rise of Occupy Wall Street,” *Harper’s Magazine*, 26 August 2014; Alasdair Roberts, “Why the Occupy Movement Failed,” *Public Administration Review* 72, no. 5 (2012, 754-762); Andrew Ross Sorkin, “Occupy Wall Street: A Frenzy That Fizzled,” *New York Times*, 12 September 2012; Naomi Wolf, “The shocking truth about the crackdown on Occupy,” *The Guardian*, 25 November 2011.
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- 4 Thomas Frank, “To the precinct station,” *The Baffler* no 21 (2012), [http://www.thebaffler.com/past/to\\_the\\_precinct\\_station](http://www.thebaffler.com/past/to_the_precinct_station).
- 5 See Jeffrey S. Juris, “Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social media, public space, and emerging logics of aggregation,” *American Ethnologist* 39.2 (2012), 259–279; Emahunn Raheem Ali Campbell, “A Critique Of The Occupy Movement From A Black Occupier,” *The Black Scholar* 41.4 (2011); Keith Gessen, Astra Taylor, Mark Greif, Carla Blumenkranz, Christopher Glazek, Sarah Leonard, Kathleen Ross, Nikil Saval and Eli Schmitt, eds. *Occupy! Die ersten Wochen in New York; eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011); David Graeber, *Inside*

- Occupy* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2012); Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street* (New York: IT Books, 2012).
- 6 Karin Knorr-Cetina, "The Ethnographic Study of Scientific Work: Towards a Constructivist Interpretation of Science," *Science Observed: Perspectives on the Social Study of Science*, ed. Karin Knorr-Cetina and Michael Mulkey (Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1983), 119.
  - 7 Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 276ff.
  - 8 Stefan Schulz, "Occupy-Urvater Graeber im Interview: Wir werden dramatische Umbrüche erleben," *Spiegel Online*, 18 May 2012, [www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/interview-mit-david-graeber-von-occupy-a-833789.html](http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/interview-mit-david-graeber-von-occupy-a-833789.html).
  - 9 See Alain Badiou, *Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London & New York: Verso, 2012); Naomi Klein, "The Most Important Thing in the World," *The Occupied Wall Street Journal* 2 (2011) <http://occupiedmedia.us/2011/10/the-most-important-thing-in-the-world/>; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Demokratie!?: Wofür wir kämpfen* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag, 2013); Noam Chomsky, *Occupy* (New York: Zuccotti Park Press, 2012); Slavoj Žižek, "We are not dreamers, we are the awakening from a dream which is turning into a nightmare," *Verso Books Blog*, 10 October 2011 <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/736>.
  - 10 Frank, "To the precinct station," [http://www.thebaffler.com/past/to\\_the\\_precinct\\_station](http://www.thebaffler.com/past/to_the_precinct_station).
  - 11 Niels Minkmar, "David Graeber in Frankfurt. Wieso stellt sich das Bankenviertel tot" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 May 2012, <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/david-graeber-in-frankfurt>

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- 12 Stefan Schulz, "Occupy-Urvater Graeber im Interview," *Spiegel Online*, 18 May 2012, [www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/interview-mit-david-graeber-von-occupy-a-833789.html](http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/interview-mit-david-graeber-von-occupy-a-833789.html).
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- 14 Jacques Rancière, "Ten Thesis on Politics," *Theory & Event* 5.3 (2001).
- 15 See <http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/occupy-wall-street-celebrated-its-second-anniversary-with-a-walking-tour>.

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