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How Local Networks Shape a Global Movement: Comparing Occupy in Amsterdam and Los Angeles

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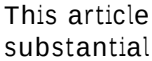

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How Local Networks Shape a Global Movement: Comparing Occupy in Amsterdam and Los Angeles

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ABSTRACT *The Occupy encampments erupting around the world in Fall and Winter of 2011 developed into local platforms where activists from different milieus came together and forged relations and shared understandings. While Occupy protests broke out around the world in a synchronized fashion and used similar symbols and narratives, the protests were sustained by quite different local networks in different cities. We argue that the abilities of local Occupy movements to cope with challenges and magnify their resonance in the public sphere largely depended on how they were connected to local activist networks. We provide a political geography of Occupy and show how local networks in Amsterdam and Los Angeles shaped the global movement. Occupy activists were able to connect to some of the more prominent elements of Los Angeles' local activist networks and effectively formulated claims, but Occupy activists in Amsterdam were isolated and lost public support. The aims of the essay are twofold: first, to explain these divergent outcomes and second, to assess the effects of these outcomes in shaping the sustainability of Occupy struggles in these cities over the medium term.*

KEY WORDS: Occupy, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, urban sociology, political geography

Introduction

Occupy protests erupted around the world in a synchronized fashion and used similar symbols and narratives, but the actual protests were sustained by quite different local networks in different cities. We argue that differences between these local networks account for important variations in the evolution of Occupy in Amsterdam and Los Angeles (LA), respectively. Occupy Amsterdam became increasingly insulated and inward-looking as it became fixated on the encampment and was cut off from their environment. Occupy LA became part of a local movement milieu and its encampment and strategic brokers functioned to connect the occupiers to other activist clusters in the city. Differences in how the Occupy movement integrated into local activist networks shaped whether these movements could sustain their message. Drawing from various sources—informal conversations with key figures in the occupations and the cities'

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movement milieus; observations of occupation sites; observations of social media and Internet materials and the minutes of the General Assemblies—this essay examines the processes of relation formation through the cases of LA and Amsterdam. We first present our theoretical angle, then discuss Amsterdam, move on to LA and finally provide some conclusions on how local networks affect the uneven development of the global Occupy movement.

Representation and Connections

Any social movement faces two major challenges. First, movements express criticisms of the existing order of things and project alternative futures but, exactly because they hold others publicly accountable, movements themselves become subject to moral scrutiny. Movements thus have to work hard to make sure that their expressions—their symbols, their icons and their texts—are 'civil'. If they fail to do so, they become regarded as outcasts rather than legitimate challengers, as noises rather than voices. The challenge of achieving legitimacy applies to all movements but in the case of Occupy it takes on a special significance as the movement is defined by its presence in public space. The occupied spaces become the concrete manifestations of the movement but they also attract intense moral scrutiny from their opponents, the media and the public at large.

Second, every movement has its own distinctive modes of communication and signifiers but for its message to resonate, it has to be part of networks that connect it to other activists as well as the general public. Movements need to patrol their own boundaries in order to harness their identity and hone their message but they also need to connect to diverse supporters who will carry their message beyond a core group of militants. Movements thus face a dilemma. If they open up too much, they lose their abilities to patrol boundaries and keep out people who will embarrass, divide or co-opt the movement. Yet if they close off entirely, they cannot reach out to prospective supporters or the general public. Movements thus need to negotiate a balance between closure and connections.

We argue that the abilities of Occupy movements to negotiate this balance largely depended on the 'associational soil' in which they were planted (cf. Nicholls & Uitermark, 2011). In Amsterdam, social movements have declined and fragmented over the last two to three decades (Uitermark, 2004, 2012). The squatting movement and the movement for immigrant rights had contracted to small groups, while movements with a considerable member base, such as the environmental movement and the labor movement, had become strongly embedded within national consultative bodies and funding structures. Building bridges and networks across activist clusters had ceased being a relevant strategy to achieve political goals. In LA, in contrast, a rich social movement milieu with a sophisticated and developed infrastructure emerged in the 1990s and 2000s (Nicholls, 2003; Soja, 2010). The city had not only become a hub of immigrant, labor and urban justice movements, but activists within different activist clusters achieved their goals by connecting across clusters and maintaining solidarity for one another's campaigns (Montgomery, 2011). Although the loss of a bridge-building tradition in Amsterdam made it difficult for locals to overcome differences with occupiers, the well-developed habit of cross-cluster networking allowed activists in LA to overcome early antipathy toward occupiers and integrate them into the local movement milieu.

It could be argued that it is not local networks but contingencies and national circumstances that determine the divergent fates of Occupy in LA in Amsterdam. National

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circumstances and contingencies are certainly important but we argue they are mediated by local networks (cf. Nicholls, 2009). In fact, it is striking that, in spite of contingencies and different national circumstances, the mobilizations were quite similar at the outset—both attracted a relatively high share of inexperienced and middle-class activists, both had strong resonance in the media up until the establishment of the encampment, both developed a discourse centered on the exploitation of the 99% by the 1% and both adopted non-hierarchical modes of decision making—and only diverged after they were fully implanted in these different urban spaces. The seeds were quite similar, but the ways the budding relations were nurtured were very different because of the differences in the social movement milieu and the ways the people within this milieu brokered the relations among the occupiers and between the occupiers and others within the political field.

Occupy Amsterdam: Strong Initial Support, Precipitous Decline

The Netherlands experienced a right-wing drift after the ascendency and killing of the populist politician Pim Fortuyn. As the political debate centered on the financial and social costs of immigration and the threat posed by radical Islam, the financial crises aroused indignation but did not become subject of political controversy. Within this political constellation, Occupy was received among many as a revelation—finally, the anxiety about the crisis had a label. While before small-scale and unsuccessful attempts had been made to occupy Beursplein—a square named after and directly in front of the stock market—the movement only gathered steam as the media identified Occupy as a major and significant force. Survey results showed that more than half of the population supported the movement: 62 per cent were positive, 21 per cent were neutral and 11 per cent were negative (6 per cent: no opinion). The intense and positive media coverage directed people to the movement's Facebook page and websites[1].

The people supporting the movement in its earliest, pre-occupation stage included a range of activists from various milieus. Some of them had earlier been part of Anonymous, the Spanish *indignado* movement, the Socialist Party, the squatting movement, the Zeitgeist movement or the 9/11 Truth movement, but it was striking that many had little or no prior experience with activism and saw Occupy as the vehicle to express their previously unarticulated grievances. The networks to arrange basic infrastructure provide media spokespersons and communicate with the municipality shaped largely online—in Internet Relay Chat-channels, on Facebook and on the Occupy Amsterdam website—in just a few days before the occupation.

On 15 October 2011, thousands of people showed up on Beursplein, carrying an amazing variety of self-made signs and developing a range of different activities ranging from public meditations to speeches and chanting. The network of activists that had formed before the occupation set up a basic infrastructure of computers, tents, a stage and a sound system while individuals and groups offered workshops, food, information, music and company. The authorities cooperated from the start, providing chemical toilets as well as electricity and policing with caution and care. An encampment emerged as a couple of people set up tents. In the weeks after, public attention decreased while the camp grew. The general assemblies were initially well attended and managed but it quickly became apparent that the dynamics of and within the camp absorbed almost all energy. While two demonstrations were planned in the first week, it is no exaggeration to say that the camp itself rather than the financial or political system became the main source of contention.

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The camp, located close to Central Station and right next to the red light district, attracted homeless people and back packers looking for shelter as well as a number of people who had, for various reasons, not been welcomed by other movements and collectives.

There were a number of activists who created strong ties among one another and were deeply committed to Occupy but the solidifying of these internal relations could not prevent internal disputes over the management of the encampment. While many friendships (and even a marriage) originated on Beursplein, the fights and fissures between the occupiers aggravated as time passed. As the number of free riders and problem cases increased, it became increasingly challenging for the devoted and committed activists and specifically the 'peace keepers' to manage the camp and to deal with drunken tourists or other disturbances. Dramas large and small unfolded, with the widely covered disappearance of a 15-year-old girl as a low point. A segment of Occupy Amsterdam occupied a former Shell building and alienated some segments of the squatting movement by claiming that they had not 'squatted' the building but 'occupied' it, with the difference supposedly being that the occupiers acted out of ideology whereas squatters only wanted housing. The action itself was fairly disastrous since the loose-knit organizers appeared to be in disagreement about the purpose of the occupation (was it to house the homeless people who had ended up on Beursplein, to organize an exhibition center or to turn it into a living space?) and were incapable or unwilling to take responsibility. When the initial occupiers had left the building, homeless and other marginalized groups took over. After a person had died from a drug overdose and another had been stabbed in the face, the mayor ordered the eviction of the building that had been heavily polluted by graffiti, excrements and trash. All this was covered in detail in local media and on national television, with occupiers often appearing in dubious roles (as when two occupiers—one donning an Indian wig and another looking like a *clochard*—slurred insults at one another while they were being recorded).

The local authorities had allowed the expansion of the Occupy encampment to become one of the largest in the world. The mayor even visited the encampment to explain how it should be managed and offered an alternative location elsewhere in the city. But as the encampment came to be increasingly seen and indeed functioned as a gathering of outcasts and misfits rather than a hub of civil and committed activists, the authorities increased pressure to exercise and maintain order. Activists argued among themselves whether to accept the offer for an alternative location, to accept the regulations or to find different modalities of protest altogether. After prolonged discussions, the core group of activists who managed the encampment agreed that many of the tents had to go, but their efforts at policing the space could not stop the mayor from imposing his own rules and order. On 8 December 2011, the police removed a number of tents and arrested a dozen activists who disagreed with the mayor's stipulations. By now, the occupiers had formed their relations and articulated their discourses fully around the encampment, closing themselves both discursively and relationally from the city's movement milieu and the general public.

Occupy LA: Strong Initial Support, Planned Decline

As in Amsterdam, the initial Occupy LA (1 October 2011) demonstration was not spearheaded by activists associated with the local social movement milieu. The leading actors of Occupy LA were linked to a new generation of activists connected to anarchist and new age networks. In many ways, the social and political dispositions of these activists

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were more comparable to Amsterdam occupiers than the more traditional activist culture of LA. Moreover, the peculiar mix of new activists, their lack of experience in actual social movements and the location of the encampment adjacent to the city's most concentrated homeless district resulted in similar challenges of producing a 'positive' public image and message. Lastly, Occupy LA drew upon the methods fashioned by Occupy Wall Street to develop internal discipline, manage boundaries and make collective decisions.

The initial reception of these newcomers in LA was uneven. Local youth activists linked to the immigrant rights movement expressed strong ambivalence concerning the occupiers. They were considered middle-class 'hipsters' who failed to understand the nature of working class and minority struggles. Many immigrant youth activists rejected the term 'occupy' because of its close association with imperialist 'occupations' in the Americas. Moreover, many local activists found problems with their strategies. For example, early occupiers maintained that the city police were a part of the 99% and should join forces with the movement. For immigrant youth activists, the LA Police Department was the repressive apparatus of a capitalist and racist state. This became an open point of dispute when a long-time youth activist argued at an Occupy general assembly meeting that, 'Although cops might make the money of the 99%, they represent and defend the 1%'. Occupiers met this argument with jeers. For immigrant youth activists in attendance, this response revealed the gulf that separated white, middle class and suburban activists from the everyday forms of repression and exploitation faced by inner city residents. Like Amsterdam (when occupiers stressed the difference between an occupation and a squat), occupiers in LA failed to understand local activist issues and cultures which resulted in sharp clashes with important activists in this milieu.

While these critiques of Occupy LA went viral through social media, locally based labor unions came out in strong support of their actions. The LA County Federation of Labor, the region's most powerful labor council, declared strong and immediate support. The national and local labor movement had long tried to inject a class-based discourse on inequalities into the public arena. The powerful message of the Occupy movement provided the labor movement with an opportunity to get its own message out to the broader public and change the national debate from controlling deficits to social inequalities.

The support provided by the local labor movement was crucial for sustaining the Occupy movement. First, local labor leaders were able to use their influence to gain the support of the city's most influential political Figures (the mayor and the City Council President). This very public support made protesters into a 'voice' of legitimate grievances. Second, labor organizers took an active role in fostering connections to the local social movement milieu, thereby helping to overcome the initial rejection by immigrant youth activists. Labor leaders used the youthful and dynamic organizers of Good Jobs LA (a labor-sponsored community-based organization) to mediate relations with occupiers. In addition to taking an active role at the City Hall encampment and general assembly meetings, Good Jobs LA organizers also worked with occupiers to coordinate actions directed at banks. Increased coordination enhanced trust and allowed labor to influence how occupiers managed their message, encampments and public demonstrations (media outreach, negotiating with police, etc.).

Local labor activists with Good Jobs LA also served as important brokers to connect occupiers with immigrant rights activists, helping to overcome early reluctance among youths. At a personal level, many of the frontline organizers of Good Jobs LA had been youth activists in the immigrant rights movement and retained their affiliations to the city's prominent rights organizations. Constant circulation between these various worlds

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helped soften critiques among other youth activists while sensitizing occupiers to the particular issues facing undocumented immigrants. At an organizational level, Good Jobs LA was able to recruit Occupy LA activists to participate in an immigrant rights action directed at the local office of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. The event, 'Occupy ICE', aimed to create resonance for the immigrant cause by framing undocumented immigrant workers as the most exploited members of the 99%.

On 30 November 2011, the encampment at City Hall was evacuated following the evacuation of other encampments across the country. The disappearance of the encampment has been a blow to Occupy LA, but activists continue to meet for weekly general assembly meetings and to organize demonstrations. Perhaps more importantly, the message developed by the occupiers has been integrated in the discourse of the local social movement milieu, with immigrant rights, labor and homeless activists employing this language to frame their own claims. In addition to the 'Occupy ICE' action described above, there have been 'Occupy Skid Row' and 'Occupy Rampart' actions to protest police brutality in gentrifying areas of the city. In short, while some activists were initially skeptical, Occupy LA did evolve into a platform for organizing against (neoliberal) capitalism.

Conclusion

We argued that all social movements face two challenges; to find concrete manifestations reflecting abstract ideals and to negotiate closure and connections. The Occupy movement experienced just how difficult it can be to live up to these challenges in both LA and Amsterdam, but the occupiers in the former city were generally more successful. After the initial outburst of enthusiasm and support, Occupy Amsterdam crumbled. When we look closely at the relational mechanisms involved, it becomes apparent that the loose collection of diverse activists was not molded into a well-organized movement network. First, the occupiers lacked the experience and capacity to attract skilled and committed activists and keep out free riders and intruders. Second, the occupiers had few connections to other activist clusters. Labor unions expressed their support but never developed a strong presence on the ground while immigrant groups were almost entirely absent. Third, the activists did have good relations with the authorities for some time but these paradoxically reinforced the tensions among the activists, who were divided about the ways in which they should respond.

The Amsterdam case contrasts sharply with the case of LA, where the loose collection of diverse activists was molded into an activist hub through its relations with the city's associational milieu. First, seasoned activists and especially labor organizers assisted in the management of the encampment and the organizing of protests. Second, these seasoned activists brokered ties to other groups, including immigrant youth activists who were initially skeptical—in contrast to Amsterdam, skeptical or ambivalent outsiders were pulled in rather than pushed out. Third, instead of simply being tolerated for some time (as in the case of Amsterdam), the activists created the conditions for a seemingly radical yet also civil occupation at city hall.

In short, the major reason for the divergent trajectories of Occupy in the two cities is that, in LA, Occupy became embedded in a local activist milieu whereas in Amsterdam it did not. The LA occupiers could build on and connect to activist clusters that had already developed the dispositions and networks needed to sustain collective action and articulate

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a powerful critique. The activists in Amsterdam, in contrast, consisted in large part of people without such networks and dispositions. The share of misfits, troublemakers and outcasts increased as the camp expanded, while the connections to activist milieus were severed, creating a situation in which the encampment became a sorrowful expression of widely cherished ideals. While the occupy message and messengers continue to circulate in LA, both largely disappeared in Amsterdam.

Note

1. The survey was done by peil.nl on 14 October 2011, a day before the occupation of Beursplein. Results can be found at http://www.georganiseerde-weldaad.nl/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/14-10-11-Peiling-de-Hond.pdf (accessed 25 April 2012).

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