



Occupy European youth work?

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Occupy! Occupy Wall Street. Occupy Dame Street. Occupy public space in 95 cities in 82 countries. Occupy economics. Occupy the buffer zone. Occupy mainstream media. Occupy together. Occupy everywhere. Occupy everything. In 2011 a verb became a noun, but it also became an unconventional political movement, a refusal, a metaphor and a slim horizon of possibility. Developing from the physical occupation of symbolic public spaces such as Wall Street, the Occupy movement came to embody, over and above the different ideas of its actors, a refusal of the anti-human and anti-social “certainties” of neoliberal capitalism. Yet there is little new under the human sun; it was also a reminder and re-enactment of the historical tensions that exist between the representative democracy of the nation-state, and democracy as a direct mobilisation and claim to collective autonomy.

As a movement characterised by the central – but not exclusive – involvement of young people, Occupy is inevitably of interest to those forms of youth work concerned with the autonomy and dignity of young people, and the impact of social forces and political-economic processes on their lives and possibilities. But how and why it is of interest has received very little attention. So, does Occupy get a study session, or is it time for #OccupyStudySession, or both?



Occupy

Global meltdown

In his timely book, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*, the BBC journalist Paul Mason describes the range of popular movements, protests, revolutions and civil wars that erupted between 2010 and 2011, and argued that what connects these developments – compared by some to the European revolutions of 1848 and 1989 – is a change in the nature of powerlessness. That is: “We’re in the middle of a revolution caused by the near collapse of free-market capitalism combined with an upswing in technical innovation, a surge in desire for individual freedom and a change in human consciousness about what freedom means.” (Mason 2012: 3)

That – broadly speaking – revolutionary conditions exist in Europe, and that they are profoundly shaped by the precariousness of the social futures available to young people across class positions, has long been known in European youth work, if not necessarily expressed in these terms. The 2008 Kiev declaration of the 8th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth, for example, makes explicit reference to the need to combat “the increased risk of precariousness”. However, not only does this now sound hopelessly understated, it was also declaimed on the cusp of the global credit crunch crisis. In 2008, and despite two decades of confident predictions of the world-historical durability of liberal capitalism, the global economic system came close to collapse.

A global property and credit bubble, facilitated by restless global flows of capital, and amplified by financial speculation conducted through unregulated transnational networks, forced world governments into drastic measures to “stabilise” their banking systems. Such was the evident panic of the corporate class that, as David Graeber points

out, it became possible to imagine the “beginning of an actual public conversation about the nature of debt, of money, of the financial institutions that have come to hold the fate of nations in their grip”. Of course, as he points out, “that was just a moment. The conversation never ended up taking place” (Graeber 2011: 15). By socialising private debts, many states had taken on crushing financial burdens that spooked powerful investors in government bonds. In Europe, “reassuring” the markets quickly came to involve a violent assault on the social contract, and thus the one-way conversation shifted to the necessary fiction of “bloated” public services, “lavish” social welfare and “spoilt” generations that expect “something for nothing”.

The events of 2011 were, in their different ways, precipitated by different attempts in captive nation-states to shore up a system of unequal power and privilege that had imploded through the weight of its own contradictions. The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, the movement of the *Indignados* in Spain and Portugal, popular resistance in Greece, and the global Occupy movement are united by a profound challenge to dictatorial and democratic regimes that lost legitimacy by, as Wolfgang Streeck puts it, serving the sovereign of the market over the sovereign of the people (Streeck 2012). In issuing this challenge, the racist geographies that provide a dominant European lens on the “Middle East” were unsettled by the Indignados movement hailing the inspiration of Tahrir Square. In turn, the extraordinary flourishing of camps across Spain in summer 2011 was one of the inspirations for the occupation of Zucotti Park near Wall Street in autumn, on the 10th anniversary of the resumption of trading after 9/11.

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Real democracy, now

The alter-globalisation movement of the 1990s was characterised by the idea of “one no, many yeses” – that is, a collective rejection of the capitalist status quo, which in turn provided a basis for the hard work of arguing and working for differently conceived egalitarian and ecological futures. In many ways this phrase characterises the Occupy movement. However the “no” to capitalism was more conflicted. Instead the “no” gained its force from a rejection of the material inequality represented by the division between the “1%” and the “99%”. The idea of the 1%/99% also inevitably represents a division that threatens to undermine established democracies, as this scale of inequity cannot be resolved through representative structures in thrall to private power.

“We are the 99%” is a powerful slogan, and also one that, depending on your perspective, illustrates the weaknesses and strengths of Occupy. In the early days of Occupy Wall Street, as media inattention gave way to a somewhat condescending interest, the movement was dismissed because it could not be recognised and reported in conventional ways: Who is the leader? What are their demands? However, the logic of Occupy, in demanding real democracy, now, involved a fundamental refusal to be represented, and thus controlled, through precisely these conventional approaches.

The key to understanding this is recognising that the form, the very act of occupying public space, is every bit as important as the content (what people say they stand for). Occupy involved the making public of “public space” through shared political action, and a principled refusal to be dispersed according to the repressive logics of state and corporate power. In so doing, the idea of “occupying” combines established, historical tactics of popular mobilisation with a contemporary awareness



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that people become political by acting politically, by engaging as equals, by exchanging ideas, by collectively overcoming the fear of illegitimate authority, and by creatively refusing the supposed common sense of threadbare ideologies. As Dan Hind has written in his pamphlet on Occupy and “the new common sense”:

“The occupations of the last year show us that people are capable of awesome sophistication once they start listening to one another... Occupation was a shared risk that led those involved to believe that they were somehow consequential... politics ceased to be something that one watched from a distance and became something that one did. The decision to act created a shared freedom to shape events. The assembly provided a medium in which this freedom could be exercised. By acting as though they mattered, they discovered what had always been true – that the assembly of people is the beginning of power.”

REAL DEMOCRACY



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It would take a far more comprehensive article to offer any assessment of what transpired over time in different Occupy sites: the different coalitions built, their relations with trade unions, left-wing parties and migrant groups, the class and generational profiles of those involved (see Howard Williamson’s comment at the end of this article), their treatment by the state and media, and so forth. But it is enough to note that the idea of “occupy” – as a logic of refusal and resistance, a challenge to the terms on which we are represented and through which we represent ourselves – now has a life beyond the physical gatherings of autumn 2011. This afterlife is sufficient to pose three questions for discussion among European youth workers.

To occupy is to participate, and to get involved without guarantees beyond the possibilities and frustrations of co-operation and co-resistance. To what extent does this vision of participation overlap with thinking about participation as a key value of youth work processes? To occupy is to be political, to attempt to occupy a future stripped of many of its promises and struggle for a shared flourishing. Can European youth work complement this political turn, especially given recent discussions of the need for more political education? To occupy is to refuse the legitimacy of structures that prevent or damage human flourishing. Inevitably, this will involve political conflict and popular struggle. How can youth workers involve themselves in young people’s struggles to reclaim their societies and their futures?



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Online enquiry

An online enquiry with a few youth workers from different countries provides insight – but obviously not thorough research – into what is going on out there and how youth workers and leaders view the Occupy movements, particularly in relation to the work they do with young people.

“Where do you stand in relation to emerging social movements and forms of politics, such as Indignados, the 99% or Occupy?”

I feel really close to the ideology these movements foster: social justice, equal opportunities, peace, etc. (...) I think the way they act is not well adapted to the reality of today's world, because for me sometimes it's too utopian. But I totally agree with their approach to the economic world situation. **(Riccardo Gulletta, youth worker and trainer, Spain)**

I agree with the majority of claims of these movements and I think that to occupy and to use public spaces for defending and fighting for human rights causes are a good starting point. Public spaces are public for all. And besides the freedom of expression and meeting, this new ownership (appropriation) of streets, squares, parks... is

one of the positive sides of these movements. (...) These movements could be also the appearance at the global level of a common “speech” and awareness for more justice, more democracy, more equality, for the fairest financial system and power relationship. (...) The challenge and dilemmas are how to transform these needs, wishes, dreams, ideas into really new actions, a new system, a new society. Should these movements create new political parties? How can we have a real impact against the capitalist financial system if these movements are completely part of it? To simplify (and provoke), everyone is against the big companies but everyone wants an Ipad and to use the Internet for free!!!! The journey is hard and complex... but another world is possible! **(Laure Dewitte, trainer, France/Portugal)**

This is a moment when youth should be empowered, not just supported when struggling with unemployment, lack of professional perspective and lack of representation at the political level. Although Occupy activists repeatedly put emphasis on their openness towards various worldviews, I perceived a general atmosphere of a left-wing tendency, which I personally do not share and which is not realistically compatible with the orientation of our organisation. **(Max Niessen, youth leader, Germany)**



Movements such as the *Indignados* are seen either as the last step before bombs and violence, or as the right thing to do but rather useless because they have no chance in our society today, or as the movement that will change things. **(Matteo Fornaca, youth worker and trainer, Italy)**

I completely agree with the ideas and the action of these movements. I think people must be active, must react to the decisions that the “masters of the world” take without our permission! **(Roberto Toscano, youth worker, Italy)**

I try to follow them frequently through the media, but mostly through social media where real-time and uncensored information is served for everyone. I have attended also an Occupy demonstration here in Pristina on the occasion of the Occupy Global on 15 October 2011, which surprisingly was quite modest compared with other demonstrations. Even though social and economic inequalities are evident in Kosovo,* social movements such as Occupy, 99% or the *Indignados* are not yet embraced by the population here. I think there is a general fatigue or apathy among the people, and I believe that social change doesn't come unless you stand up to raise your voice! **(Ron Salaj, youth leader and trainer, Kosovo)**

We elect people to represent us, to make decisions that are best for the majority of the people in society. But what are we supposed to do when it's not working? As long as the emerging social movements stay as non-violent as possible I'm all for it! I wish more people would become involved in making this a better world. **(Asa Moren, youth worker, Sweden)**

*All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

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“How are these movements relevant to the young people you work with?”

The young people I work with are quite far from these movements. They are always living in an “emergency dynamic”, fighting against poverty, for mobility and ICT access, for no discrimination, access to work, against domestic violence. Their frustration is similar to the young people in the UK or France who set cars on fire and steal materials and clothes from shops. They feel closer to these young people than to the *Indignados*. As educators we can “use” these movements to help them to understand the origins and reasons of their needs and problems, to motivate them to participate, to canalise their frustration in a productive and constructive way and to help them to lose their fear to express and organise themselves. On the other side we can also invite the activists involved in these political and social movements to learn more about these different realities and approach these young people to understand them better. I suppose that facilitating this bridge is one of my roles actually. **(Laure Dewitte, trainer, France/Portugal)**

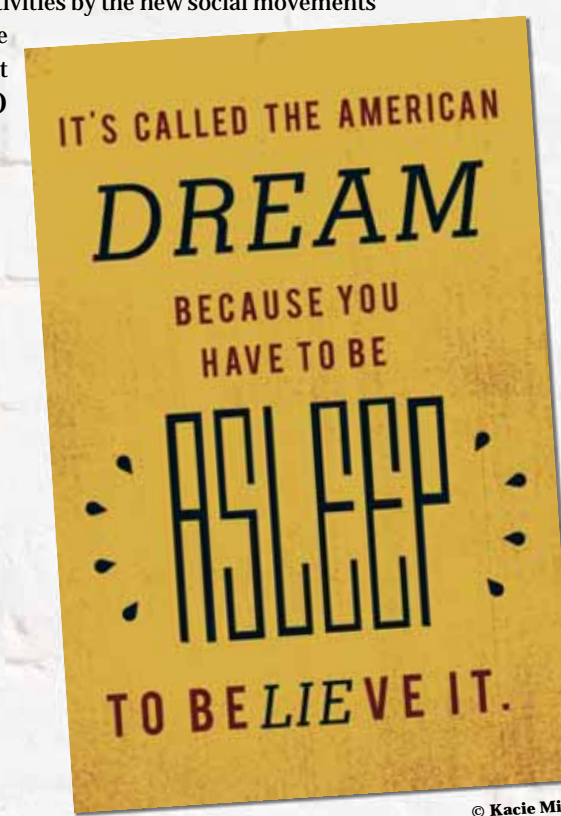
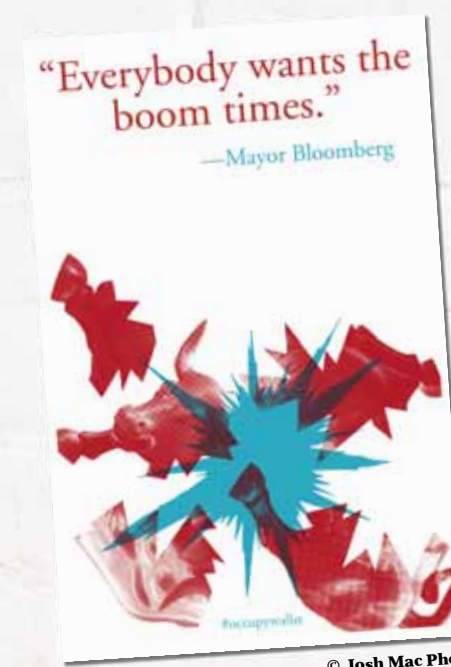
For the young people I work with in my association or in the project on youth policies with the Tuscany region these movements are a way of expression for the struggle for rights and of protesting. For other young people, totally disengaged with the political situation, that have lost their trust in others and themselves, these movements are empty, and will not bring any real contribution to change. **(Silvia Volpi, trainer and youth worker, Italy)**

When it comes to the young people I work with... I'm not even sure they are aware of the fact that these movements exist. Some of them, who have active parents, know what's going on in the world around them. But the average young person at this youth club is not very interested in politics at all. Unfortunately I think it's because they think it's something really difficult, and that they don't know how to express themselves. We've tried to have a few exercises, making them more interested to inform themselves about issues that concern them... but it's like they can't be bothered. I do believe that if we can get them a bit more “fired up” the different social movements definitely are relevant for them. On the other hand, the young people (mostly teenaged girls) that I work with within the equestrian organisation are quite involved in different matters such as youth participation and equal funding within sports. They have their own blogs where they express their opinions, they are active in different organisations and a few of them are politically active and once in a while get involved in different social movements. **(Asa Moren, youth worker, Sweden)**

How can youth workers involve themselves in young people's struggles to reclaim their societies and their futures? **(Gavan Titley)**

...and we also got some spicy input from a researcher

Where I stand is very, very clear – in a state of some confusion and uncertainty! The emergent social movements across Europe and the world, usually involving disproportionate numbers of young people, are a classic mix of both opportunity and threat. Much will depend on their capacity for creative self-discipline, as Occupy and, in the UK, UK Uncut, have done, so far. There is anger and opposition to the turmoil of contemporary political, economic and social arrangements. The young are especially aggrieved about their prospects for the future. There are potential alliances, perhaps almost for the first time, of what I crudely depict as the “socially disadvantaged” and the “intellectually disaffected”. The first group have had a hard time for a long time, but have rarely organised effectively. The second group, sometimes in fact from the first group originally, are those that have pursued their educations in response to proclamations about the future “knowledge-based economy” only to find that their labour market situation often seems – and increasingly is – no better than for those who have few or no qualifications and abandoned education at the first opportunity. It is this second group that has, arguably, greater potential to develop a well-organised, creative response, using the resources of social networking and political understanding. So such a mix may be healthy or toxic. We have seen both over the past year: camps, protests, campaigns and riots. Most public activities by the new social movements hold the possibility of any of these. It is how they are balanced that will ultimately shape the impact that they produce. **(Howard Williamson, researcher)**



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