Protagorians Among Us: Rhetorical Performances at Occupy

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Abstract

Protagoras, Plato recounted, taught how to harness word and action and use them to make an effective contribution to the affairs of the City. Far beyond public speaking, this was an indictment to use performance and philosophy in tandem to insinuate public demands. On the 9th of October 2011, Slavoj Zizek joined fellow Protagorians at Occupy Wall Street in solidarity. He delivered a speech encouraging those assembled to keep going and was followed, on the 23rd of October, by Judith Butler who did the same. Both of these visiting philosophers were rather crudely hoisted onto a raised platform in front of protesters who repeated their words in unison as a means of amplification and in order to pass their messages to all present. A little over a month later an online journal – Theory & Event – published a supplement focusing on just this combination of contributions. In this paper I would like to consider The Occupy Movement's rebellious representations of Protagoras' indictment. Specifically, I would like to consider the geographies of occupied place and space and what power and knowledge is delivered and viewed in such formations. Spectatorship and the sharing-as-witness of politicized performance "happenings" seems to indicate a new performance form and yet, as early as the late Modern period (1910 – 1915) there are examples of art "happenings" offering similar anti-authoritarian contribution. So, is this theatricality new, or did this transnational performance collective occupy, not just land, but performance forms as well?

Keywords: Occupy movement, Protagoras, performance of protest

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Protagoras, Plato recounted,[1] taught how to harness word and action and use them to make an effective contribution to the affairs of the City. What follows, considers The Occupy Movements representations of Protagoras' indictment. The intent is not to reconstruct Protagoras, but access a distillation of his essential methodological traits. Specifically, this essay considers whether harnessing word (argument) and action (occupation) – on its own – can constitute a transformative performance. In this, I am not seeking to replace the Aristotelian idea of performance, nor its transformative aspect. However, I do not believe that it is entirely appropriate to confine the mimetic acts of Occupy's discourse to an Aristotelian dialectic.

The "efficacy debate" is a central issue for practitioners and scholars of political performance, like Baz Kershaw, and I shall not question the truth of such claims that, in order to be a performance the event must – in some way – transform its audience. Methodologically, Raymond Williams' articulation[2] of culture as material that is bound up in hegemonic hierarchies constituting a matrix of many forms is used. Three of these forms are imperative to the dynamism of culture as a thing performed: creative activity, individual

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[1] Plato claimed that Protagoras taught the proper management of one's own affairs, how best to run one's household, and the management of public affairs, [and] how to make the most effective contribution to the affairs of the city by word and action.

[2] Something he gained a reputation for insisting on throughout his editorship of _Keywords_ from 1987 – 1993.

learning, and maintaining social fabric; all three will be addressed in this discussion of the performance of Occupy.

Finally, this essay questions, as others have[3] the ability of the performance of protest to affect any kind of political change. The argument put forward here is that Occupy was not, strictly speaking, 'a performance of politics'. Rather, its politics emerged out of its performance of rhetorical devices and strategies that put the weaker argument on display.

Protagoras, Sophistic Rhetoric and Porous Publics

Hannah Arendt remains an essential point of reference for modern political thought. Yet, Arendt's critique of contemporary politics paradoxically found its inspiration in antiquity; throughout her work, Arendt draws extensively not just on the writings of Plato and Aristotle, but also on a much broader conception of the political structures of Greece and Rome. In particular, Arendt turned to the Greek polis to model an egalitarian, pluralist and agonistic politics. This immersion in antiquity was far from backward-looking and, more recently, Costas Douzinas defended a return to the Ancients by acknowledging that, "going to the pre-Socratics in search of the mythology of resistance is perhaps a strange choice. Yet these cryptic mediations and apophthegms have conditioned the way our civilization understands itself" (78).

The Greeks, via Protagoras, argued that everything was up for debate and that everything was relative to one's own situation and determination. The direct quote from Protagoras that remains is: "Of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that [or 'how'] they are, and of things that are not, that [or 'how'] they are not." (DK 0B1[4]) This Man-Measure statement is best explained in Plato's *Theaetetu*s,[5] and Protagoras emphasizes how human subjectivity determines the way we understand and construct our world, and explains how judgments about qualities and abstractions – pain, for example – are subjective.

In the same way, the dispute of the 99% that Occupy claims to represent – their slogan "We are the 99%" references wealth inequality in the Global North (Graeber 40-41) – can contain many disputes determined by the relativity of the participant. Each dispute is relative to each participant who raises it; each dispute occupies the same stage and none is judged as more significant than the other; arguments are as important as they are to each person who experiences them. It is Protagoras' "Man is the Measure" statement that forms the foundations of relativism as a mature theory, and it is the theoretical positioning that allows the Occupy Movement its porosity.

The word "porosity" – or "porous" – is used here as borrowed from material science; as an aspect of void measurement or, what in art could be called negative space. In material science, objects with a high negative void or negative space are more accommodating and permeable with high acceptance of flow or fluidity. Porosity is used here to define the Occupy Movement as ideologically sponge-like, with an open physical construction. Thus, the dispute that Occupy claimed to represent could be many disputes: it could be the anger of

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[3] See Schlossman, Miller and Román.
[4] Protagoras. 316c – d: When quoting from these original texts I refer to them with their Diels-Kranz ('DK') numbers.
[5] *Theaetetu*s (1.1 – 1.191).

the pensioner over fuel poverty or the disillusion of the graduate student over an empty future.

The Royal Court's production of Anders Lustgarden's play *If You Don't Let us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep*, was a dramaturgical example of a memorialisation of the porosity of the Occupy movement. The play – a distillation of the constitution and ideology of the protest – features a 1970's activist, a pensioner who cannot afford her gas bill, a disenfranchised city worker, an out-of-work graduate, an economics post-graduate, and an angry unemployed youth, all gathering to protest on the same platform but for different reasons. These pluralisms of truth – which are connected to the plurality of truths that Sophists described – is also what allowed the Occupy mass appear so extrinsically threatening to the institutional hegemony. Intrinsically, the construction of debating platforms in Zuccotti Park and learning tents at St. Paul's in London posed a greater threat, as they not only publicised (in oration) a rhetoric that called for an overthrowing of conventional systems of capital and government, but they disseminated it via argumentation and debate in the classic Socratic tradition.

As in Plato's *Protagoras*, the behaviour and participation of Occupyists offered a provocative form of education and public philosophy. Public philosophy in this context refers to doing philosophy with general audiences in a non-academic setting. This is strikingly similar to how Plato describes Protagoras' intent that an argument should be an open-ended game of self-discovery and revelation for each learner, the learning tents erected outside St. Paul's Cathedral offered this same sense of pedagogy to everyone. The tents were places of self-discovery and revelation; variegated public spaces, enabling learning via discourse and assembly. Occupy's view on education could, therefore, be seen as similar to Callias' – the man in whose house Plato's *Protagoras* is set. Callias has an anarchic view of politics, advocating that everyone should do according to his nature. "In this view education is a haphazard affair in which some learn, others do not, and all at their own pace, in their own style, and at their own discretion" (Cohen 8). Occupy offered not only a Protagorian space for learning, but also acted as a "midwife of ideas" in the Socratic example. This role-play is provocative as it emphasises not what is being learned, but the socially democratic nature of collective learning as performed.

Like the Occupyists, the Sophists of Ancient Greece were regarded in some quarters as dangerous subversives who taught young men how to overthrow established conventions with logic and argument.[6] Protagoras, remembered as the father of Sophistry, was associated with a rational and critical attitude that was widely unwelcomed by the conservatives of the day, as the implications of their arguments dismantled their opinions.[7] Plato records that they developed taxonomies of speech acts – assertion, question, answer, and command – that are widely associated with political rhetoric and the art of argumentation. Information on Protagoras is relatively sparse and only a few fragments of his actual words remain, so there is little agreement as to the accuracy of Protagoras' practice of teaching. However, it is clear that he valued the performative aspect of oratory in argument, taught its use, and believed that an argument could be won by its performance alone.

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[6] Plato, *Protagoras*; *Protagoras* 316c – d; *Meno* 91c; and Aristophane*s, The Clouds*.
[7] See Sprague, and also Schiappa

This essay sets aside the contention that has arisen via Plato's pitting of Socrates against Protagoras, as this has long been misconstrued in translation. Moreover, it does not conflate the terms "Culture Wars" or "Truth Wars" of popular media parlance with this presumed ancient conflict, as this would be reductive. 'Truth' in rhetoric is referred here as Socrates refers to "good" in thought. This, Plato has him describe, is "exclusive" – sometimes translated as "primitive" – another way of translating it would be as "individual"; "good being individual." In this, Socrates argues for subjectivity of thought and "good," while Protagoras argues for the objectivity of speech and "truth." Furthermore, as McCoy sets forth, Plato's *Protagoras* is a performance of Socratic dialogue between both the philosophical and Sophistic, not his own definitive stance.

Indeed, one can observe that Plato's dialogues – the *Apology of Socrates* and *Menexenus* in particular – make extensive use of the rhetorical skills espoused by Protagoras to persuade others. This essay assumes that, if in pluralism beliefs about truth and the construction of truths are objective and there is no resolution and no *single* best conclusion, then there is no "right" answer; there is only a more tolerable one. Thus, pluralism allows a public to "speak their own truths," yet listen and abide together in a shared truth. It is within this pluralistic model that Occupy, on behalf of the 99%, raised a rhetorical challenge to the status quo with its argument. In doing so, it put to practice Protagorian principles, showing the lesser argument of the citizen-less to be the greater, more altruistic truth.

The protest that Occupy embodied was the performance of civil discontent – meaning, the sum of civil protest initiatives: political activism, ethical activism, environmental activism, and so on. Crucially, in the neoliberal West, the nature of public demonstrations has changed due to the re-calibration of the demos that neoliberalism brought about. Protests are no longer, strictly speaking, "civic," in the sense that they are not seeking support for a "civil right;" instead, people now protest for the right to exist as part of a polis (Martin 791).

Occupy was set in motion by a group of people in New York in 2011, who felt neglected when it came to expressing their situation in the Global Financial Crisis and, lately, how this restricted their participation as polis in the idea of demos. David Graeber records the first email he received on the 3rd of August to alert him about something "strange" happening near the big bull sculpture at the New York Stock Exchange (35). Their numbers grew, and less than a month later the protesters moved to Zuccotti Park, a public square within shouting distance of the City Hall. London followed suit quite quickly, and protesters attempted to occupy Paternoster Square, outside the City's Stock Exchange in protest; they were pushed a few hundred yards left and onto the steps of St Paul's Cathedral – a happy accident that insinuated the Church into an argument that was largely perceived as a moral one.

The most representative of Protagoras' contributions beyond the Man Measure statement is this principle of the "two-logoi" – "There are two arguments standing opposed to each other on every issue" (DK80 A1) – which is relative to the more pervasive trend in rhetoric as performance (in debate, for example) of Antilogy. Aspects of Free Will and Free Markets, and the crass reductionism of Aristophanes,[8] have since framed a ruinous relationship

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[8]Aristophanes dramatizes his suspicion of the sophist thus: a teacher of rhetoric (called Socrates, but with the doctrines of a Sophist) persuades that the weaker argument – that Gods do not exist and that man is the sole arbitrator of his fate – is stronger, and moral chaos ensues via Stepsiades and his son Pheidippides, who learn rhetorical tricks to cheat their creditors and they eventually abandon all sense of morality.

between *logos* (word) and *aletheia* (truth) as contending features of rhetoric; as "spin" that has disconnected rhetoric from philosophy in what Pucci describes as "fragmentation" (679). Yet, this taint of Aristophanes holds little relevance here, as Occupy behaved as a performance of argumentation aware of its *kairos* – or, its occurrence as argument at "the proper time" (DK80 A1, A52) –, such that persuasion succeeded by responding and capitalising on the ebb and flow of context. Everything about Occupy ebbed and flowed, especially its information which happened and was disseminated immediately via social media. But such an ephemeral entity, by its nature, lacks the substance to connect it to change; it is constituted solely by its immediacy of performance.

Occupy did not change things in a material sense; its aim was rather to shift the way debates were framed. It reminded us that we need to collectively fight for a society that respects itself, and draw lines in the sand against what is intolerable. If a light of "truth" was to be shown on the hegemonic rhetoric that kept (and, arguably, still keeps) the polis at bay in the neoliberal state, it must then be those same rhetorical performances that perform the challenge and thus liberate them. The rhetoric of populism is such that the campaign or protest performs as the voice of 'the people' united, or at least for the non-ruling, non-organised silent majority. This voice has no particular mandate; its appeal is to fairness and the emotionally authentic strength of feeling that arises from the "ordinary" public. This differs starkly from political legitimacy, which is – in neoliberalism – ultimately tied to "stakeholders" with vested interests, and the markets that those who govern prop up.

When politicians do express an interest in the affects that their decisions have, their response is couched in the rhetoric of "moral sentiment" (Seligman 205).This, Bryant reminds us, is a learned strategy of "manners, education and cultivation, which enjoin respect for the sensibilities of others" (143). The latter is distinct from the improvised surge of communal consciousness present in populist discourse. It is this personally authentic and vaguely chaotic performance of feeling and consciousness that was so clearly visible at Occupy, and this achieved two things: it handed moral authority back to the public body of the Occupyists, and it acted as redemptive rhetoric, because the Occupyists' words were imbued with moral authority and the speech of "truth" as Plato's Protagoras understood it.

Performing Politics, and Occupy as Carnival

As in the world of theatre, the role played by Occupyists could be viewed as the locus of conflicting energies: alone, each voice had subjective relativity; together, the communal voice had a sophistry. A clear and relative example of this, were the props that the Occupy employed. A device known as the Human Microphone, for example, in which speechmakers were rather crudely hoisted onto a raised platform in front of protesters who repeated their words in unison as a means of both amplification and ownership, was a performance. Taking Judith Butler's oration[9] as a case in point, the reader can deconstruct the call and repeat mechanism as a method of sophistic argumentation; first, the orator decides for himself what he wants to say and then he delivers that content to other people, who learn the rhetoric themselves as they reiterate it (Cohen 10-11).[10] It is reminiscent of double-voicing, in that it

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[9] You can see it in http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVpoOdz1AKQ
[10] See also Kerferd.

contains – on a certain level – an illicit mixing of what Bakhtin terms "mésalliance."[11] That is to say, it hollows out the mechanism of speech used for political pronouncements, in order to fill it with 'truth' or subversive messages – as enacted in a Carnival Mas. This repetition of words could also be seen as iteration: both in a theatrical – as in the Futurists and DaDaists' model – and in a dynamic systemic way – as in its functional heuristic form. Functionally, it amplifies sound while activating aural learning; on a psychosocial level, however, as with Avant-garde theatre, it forces reflection on the means and the meanings of that cultural production. This alludes to the coda of the carnavalesque that Bakhtin's mésalliance represents. Ideologically, like Carnival, Occupy "unmoors [the] performance and performers from constrained contingency and liberates the body for insurrection without recourse to either misappropriation or expropriation" (Drewal 119).

Yet, if a protest is both situated in the very thing it rails against and its form is consciously open, it is unlikely that it will transform things in a material sense. It will, however, shift the way debates are framed. If we use the Man Measure statement – as has been argued – to describe the relativism of "the 99%", we must also situate that 99% in the hegemony they have been born and raised in. That hegemony is, in point of fact, a neoliberal one that champions 'the individual', and one in which everyone is "individuated" and morally responsive and responsible to themselves. As Margaret Thatcher reminded Britain, the ideological truth is that there is 'no such thing as society' (1987); the interface between the individual and society – sociology's fundamental tool for describing and analysing the behavioural interface – has become significantly uncoupled by neo-liberalism. It is no surprise then that we recognise this in the operation of Occupy, where there were "no leaders, no spectators, no side-lines, only an entanglement of many players who do their own thing while feeling part of a greater whole" (*We are Everywhere* 177-78).

The Occupyist, then, is both situated at the neoliberal spectrum, and rails against that enforced hegemony. Occupy "exemplifies the anti-capitalist movement's awareness and its perhaps problematic appropriation/exchange of oppositional culture and tactics" (Bogad 545). Therefore, if a democratic societal transformation was to be wrought, it was not Occupy that would manufacture it, nor – looking at the Occupy manifesto – did it intend to. Their ten-points all begin with the egoism – "we need;" "we are;" "we refuse;" "we do not;" "we want;" "we support;" "we call for;" and "we stand in" (Occupy London, 2011) – of rhetorical demand, not the activity of a "we will do" or "we will change." These words, albeit imbricated with the collective "we," are – in point of fact – very neoliberal; they are purchaser demands, individuated desires, and customer dissatisfactions. And they are up-ending hegemonic rhetoric to make their weaker argument the stronger: the rhetoric of the 1% was up-ended by the 99% "We" of "We are the 99%."

From the oldest to the youngest participant at Occupy, the only open and sustaining collective that had acted as protagonist in their (perhaps) lifetimes had been the Market – suddenly, here was a collective that was different; it remained open and sustaining while it rhetorically challenged the protagonist the Market has become, and in doing so it publically performed a new alternative that took centre stage. In this, the performance event is purely

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[11] Bakhtin, 1984 and 1986.

rhetorical – the showing of an argument – as it does not perform change. Yet, it is still transformative, as it transformed the weaker argument into a stronger one.

Occupyists became a moveable feast of pop-up, anti-authoritarian clashes that employed irony and play in their convening of tactical, porous flash-mobs. Regional occupations, University occupations, and occupations of public libraries facing closure, were all examples of the Movement as performed in this way. In this paradigm, participants seemed to freeze-frame or converge as a living tableau, whose liquidity of motion translated rhetorically as a response to the current hegemony. This is very reminiscent of Carnivals; it describes an ad-hoc, moving parade of provocation. The reference here is not to the costumed spectacle that – for example – the Notting Hill Carnival has become, but rather to the type of "carnival," that Crichlow and Armstrong describe as precipitating

> political and economic questions, on the one hand with a view to scrutinizing (top-down) state interventions and impositions, and, on the other, with bottom-up or horizontal carnavalesque subversions and general manoeuvres. (402)

Furthermore, the performance aesthetic of protest at Occupy was more contingent on rhetorical carnival and the opening up of porous spaces of knowledge than a bodily performance of, say, a salsa rhythm. It was deliberately anti-authoritarian and disruptive, and easily lent itself to a movement identified as global, anti-corporate and anti-authoritarian. Arguably, what this situated was an aesthetic of rhetoric that was performed – to both its constituents and spectators – as a redemptive and authentic inversion of the capitalist system.

There was an exchangeability of repetition in Occupy that Žižek uses Hegel to reference (996), while Policante imbricates with Occupy's Carnivalesque props in saying that "[t]he social world created by capitalism could be compared to a spelled carnival in which dwell not men, but masks of men"(233). As opposed to the human subjects behind the masks of Carnival (as for example described by Bakhtin),[12] the subjects behind the masks that Policante speaks of – the Guy Fawkes Anonymous mask which also references Moore and Lloyd's 1990 comic serial *V for Vendetta* – perform on the 'economic stage' as 'personifications of economic relations' (Marx 285). Occupy adopted this Mask spontaneously as a symbol of "self-knowing, carnivalesque, festive citizenship" (Jones 43):

> We will remain faceless, proclaimed an Occupyist, because we refuse the spectacle of celebrity, because we are everyone, because the carnival beckons, because the world is upside down, because we are everywhere. By wearing masks we show that who we are is not as important as what we want, and what we want is everything for everyone. (Bogard 544)

The use of the mask, therefore, performed a [re]presentation of an early English plot or the ideology of a 1980's comic book, and is an example of an aesthetic rhetoric that has become unmoored. The performance of the mask does not allude to any intention sought by its wearer to leave behind a solution to the Marxist conundrum of capitalism. Rather, it is a precisely appropriate Carnival Masque that punctuates and resituates the inconsistencies of capitalist subjectivities in the occupied space. Its rhetorical function is to perform "[t]he

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[12] Bakhtin 1968.

jaunty tension between is and ought, being and becoming [and it] allows an aesthetic gaze to slip undetected into a political one" (Martin 791).

Audience and the Rhetoric of Place and Space

The staging of Occupy was playful, in that it was both a spectacle with the intention to seek spectacle. Equally, it was ironic as its intent was to provoke via the anarchy of sabotage and trespass. This jaunty theatre of irony and play jolted people out of their malaise by jabbing and provoking them to fight for a society that respected itself and drew lines in the sand against what is intolerable. Signs brandished by protesters included: "Tax the F***ing Rich" – held by a pensioner of advanced years; "I lost my job, and found an Occupation" – next to the tent of a middle-aged female; and "I am here for my future" – written in shocking pink on the small placard of five year old. A performance of virtuous rhetoric granted spectators a space in which to be optimistic in the belief that one (or many) might be able to mitigate the existential pointlessness of it all through *something*: "This is the 1st time I have felt hopeful in a very long time," screamed one placard. There was hope, but there was anger too.

Capitalism in the neo-liberal state ingrains a hierarchy in which "want" ideologically supersedes "need," to such a degree as to constitute desire as virtuous (as discussed above with "we want," "we need," and so on). The false certainty of this formulation was revealed when austerity hit so many whose lives were already precarious; the response that followed was anger over being misled (by the banks, by government, and others) and anger – especially for the Left – over allowing it to happen. The trine of precarity, nostalgia and anger creates what Stiegler calls *disaffection* and, added to this, were the increased stress levels accompanying global austerity. Stress in austerity confuses in its frustration, but it ultimately fuels anger. This anger sought a performance in the playful carnival of Occupy, whose scenography was a public square of discordant cartographers, debating precisely how the maps of power should be redrawn in both object and method.

Participation in Occupy as a movement invited what Endres and Senda-Cook term "place as rhetoric," because the places of performance – of Occupation – themselves were "rhetorical tactics in movements towards social change"(259), and the very rhetorical use of place and space in performance protest was incorporated as part of their epistemic language. With Occupy, places of occupation, the bodies of constituents and spectators, and exchanged words, all interacted to create a new language of protest: a new rhetorical challenge to the neoliberal condition. This new rhetoric of protest was formed and communicated as an Event at the right time, which, as described earlier, is a classical sophistic component of virtuous rhetoric. In this case, the term "event" refers both to a performative event and Event in the Badiouian sense. Badiou situates an Event (with a capital "E") as something that triggers the/a truth Event – a "break based only on chance" (Badiou 124). This, according to him "helps us think about the ways in which places and "truths," as well as the people in them, are always in the process of becoming" (259), and the ways in which the places and rhetorical truths of the Occupy and the Occupyists were always and already in the process of becoming, which is to say that Occupy behaved as a site of transformation.

The Occupyist felt compelled to perform an occupation – entering and occupying a public square – as an intervention, because their dilemma was one where morality outweighed the ethical subject breaking with the hegemony of late capitalism and, as Douzinas reminds us, "[e]very time ethical subjectivity breaks with social reality, resistance and rebellion return"(83). This comment is as true for the Futurists and Dadists as it was for the Occupyists, whose aesthetic construction of performing art left behind "documents not of edification but of paradox[ical event]" (Melzer: 29-30). What was most distinct about the Occupy movement was that it behaved as Event in different cultural spaces – both regionally and internationally. In this, it could be argued that Occupy behaved as a negotiating agent that used public discourse as a means of intervention – both physically and symbolically – to enable cultural frame switching between spaces and places. Further, these "Capitalist Realisms"[13] were interpolated and resisted by both the individual and the collective, and the performances emerging from that dilemma were affective for all that participated: actor (Occupyist); collective (Occupy); and audience (spectators). Thus, we think anew about how Occupy performs its rhetoric in such a way that interpolation and resistance are performed as a process – something that is, arguably, the most democratic and transformational aspect of Occupy's performance.

This paper has argued that what was transformational about Occupy was its performance not of politics per se, but of the rupture of the truth Event in politics, and that was Sophistic (Protagorian) in its rhetorical construction. Occupy provided a porous space of resistance in which the broken neoliberal subject paused, collected itself and spoke: "We are the 99% and we have moral authority." Its form performed a resistance to neoliberalism – sometimes in Guy Fawkes masks and sometimes by learning in a tent. It also emphasised the ambiguities between neoliberal hegemony, rhetorical discourse and Event. Clearly, the ideology and aesthetic of Occupy set personalised and public performances of politics at a volatile juncture. The movement and its acts of occupation behaved as a vector: the point of application of a force moving through a space, at a given velocity in a given direction. Its concept had no subject or object other than itself. It was an idea performed as an act, albeit a nomadic disruptive one, that returned – however briefly – the virtuous aspects of Protagorian discourse to the publics, whom they were intended to serve.

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[13] See Fisher.

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