

OCCUPYING SPACE: THE BATTLE FOR POLITICS¹

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Helena Chavez Mac Gregor reads recent modes of global protest in order to argue that claims made by civilians of and against the state are no longer simply asserted through a battle over representation, but have transitioned into a politics of occupation that prompts a rethinking of the very meanings of the political.

For more than a decade, the construction of politics has been determined within the logic of exception and sovereignty. Although at the end of the twentieth century the Balkan conflict already heralded a logic of war, following September 11th, the early 2000s were marked by terror, creating a foundation where, following the proposals of Carl Schmitt, the specific difference from which to determine the political was to be found once more in the figure of the enemy.

Regardless of the fact that this seems to be the norm of civilizing political logic, something has changed in recent years, from the “Arab Spring” to the student movements in Chile and the United Kingdom, from 15-M in Spain to Occupy Wall Street in the U.S.A., from the mobilizations leading up to and following the elections in Mexico to the protests for transportation in Brazil. All different forms of protest, impossible to catalogue within a simple group or category, but which nevertheless challenge us to imagine what sort of politics is outlined in this new configuration: political forms that surpass what we had called “social



“Zócalo Mexico City, 1st of July 2012”. Photo, Francis Aljys

movements,” “civil disobedience,” “revolution” or “resistance.” Occupations of space that have implied a change in the conversation, a force that appears constantly under siege, obliging us to ask what it is that appears in the outbreaks of protest, after its possibilities of rupture, but also after its limits and its dangers. It is possible to think that the different mobilizations emerging in much of the world signify a fissure in the logic of political philosophy, reiterating the question of the significance of a category that, after years of living under the paradigm of violence/right and exception/sovereignty, has become the question of claims, of the spaces of appearance, of the forms of representation and distribution; a questioning of organization that manifests a disagreement that seems not to want to assume the condition of bare life and other figures of exception.

Without conflating these processes, certain traits do present themselves as constant across almost all of these episodes of mobilization. For one, there is a growing discontent in the face of exclusion from politics itself, whether in “authoritarian” regimes or in



“We Embroider for Peace” Photo, Gerardo Espino

supposed “democracies,” which has led people to take over streets and plazas, and to seek out forms of association and assembly in a clear show of disagreement with existing politics of participation and distribution. Another constant we can identify is these protests’ struggle with the communications media, a battle not just over what the media transmit, but also over the forms of representation that they have created in order to produce identification, and which attempt to reduce the forms that do appear to pre-determined “enemies:” a terrorist, a hooded thug, an anarchist, an extremist, an illegal immigrant, etc. It is clear that the role of the media in the contemporary world is played out within the alliances they forge not only with specific governments, but also with economic powers with whom they attempt to produce audiences and spectators (as support and legitimacy) rather than forms of the public.

In Mexico, the recent demonstrations of the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores por la Educación (CNTE, a teachers’ union founded in Mexico in 1979 as an alternative to the mainstream Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación [SNTE] by

teachers in the Union from the poorer, southern states of Mexico) between April and October 2013, have met with a strong media campaign discrediting them. The sort of strategy followed by this faction of the teachers' union takes a classical format of putting pressure on the federal government through blocking traffic and taking over spaces like the Zócalo or blocking access to the international airport in Mexico City. The kind of representation that most of the media generate is ideal for provoking a generalized rejection by civil society at large, wherein what once again comes to emerge, with commentaries both on television and in social networks, is a contempt that is sustained by a profound classism and racism. The violence of the rejection, embodied in a series of representations – poor, lazy, dark-skinned, etc. – contributes to the diminishment of the right of social protest in the seek of individual interests.³

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Against conditions of representation, “occupation” of space has functioned as a destabilization that forecloses the possibility of exclusion. On one hand, channels and networks of communication are occupied, making political use of technology not just as a matter of creating a space of contagion and dissemination, but also forms of empowerment that allow for a type of action in the network that establishes forms of constant organization and research.⁴ And, on the other, in an occupation related to but not determined by the previous one, public space is occupied through an emplacement of the body, suspending the everyday logic of spaces and finding, at the moment of assembly,



“1st of December 2012”. Photo, Enrique Méndez de Hoyos

a shared program that suspends distances, whether these be social, class-based, of agenda, or of political party, to create a moment of effervescence and of disidentification where other sorts of enunciations, performativities and affects are put into play.

These modes of occupying space mark changes of emplacement, localization and grammar wherein occupation as a political tool calls into question its state and military use. As W. J. T. Mitchell asserts in the text “Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation”:

For years, many of us have been thinking of participation primarily in these terms: as the imposition of martial law on a resistant population, the proliferation of dictatorships in the name of resistance to communism (or fundamentalism, or terrorism), and the fostering of “freedom” (for markets and speculative capital, nor for human beings). But now, suddenly, the word “occupation” has taken on a new meaning: the reclaiming of public space by masses of disenfranchised people; the peaceful, nonviolent

seizure of places in an effort to provide a new beginning; a foundational space for justice, democracy, and equality. (Mitchell 2013: 105)

This appropriation of space raises important questions about how to re-signify politics, where what emerges, beyond a social movement properly so-called, is a battle for the space of appearance.

One way of understanding this struggle for space is via the construction of politics as a mode of appearance that takes as its basis Hannah Arendt’s argument, in which action and speech create a space between participants, a space of appearance wherein I appear before others as those others appear before me. This form precedes any construction of the public, as a result of which the space of appearance is no longer an ontological condition of space, but becomes rather a mode of doing, of action, in which occupations (and here we should not limit ourselves strictly to bodies assembled in the street or plaza) activate a claim not just to the space but rather to the public. That is, they create space through appearance, suspending any idea of politics based on “belonging,” “rights,” or “origin.”

This principle of appearance from which Arendt begins is prevalent in recent arguments – by Judith Butler and W. J. T. Mitchell, among others – and allows us to think politics from a frame that takes complete leave of the paradigms of political theory, or that allows us at least to problematize the frame. What form of relation can be created out of an affirmation that renounces an ontology that is a logical consequence a pure abandonment, of being disposable entities who participate in their own condition of exclusion? Appearance enables the creation of a politics wherein there is no longer a “law” of distribution, but rather a

series of historical conditions that may be questioned, debated and disarmed.

One possibility presented on the basis of aesthetics is to problematize the frames of the configurations for thinking about how these distributions appear and then to interrogate them. I propose that we think of aesthetics as a condition of possibility upon which the politics of appearance is established, and that determines *how* that which appears *does* appear.

By following Kant's proposals on aesthetics, postulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he proposes the transcendental aesthetic – space and time – as the condition of the possibility of all experience, revised subsequently by Foucault and re-conceived by Rancière, it is possible to situate aesthetics in its relationship to experience. This field is presented as the structure in which the forms of appearance and the representation of that which appears are determined, from which the forms of the perceptible are distributed, generating a distribution of political visibilities and enunciations.

Rancière argues that aesthetics is a distribution of the perceptible that determines a mode of articulation between forms of action, production, perception and thought. With this Rancière means to point out that the political is first and foremost a battle over perceptible/sensible material that generates modes of visibility regarding the things that the community considers 'able to be seen', as well as the appropriate subjects who may see. This 'seeing' in no way refers to a subject's condition or capacity, but rather to a configuration and production of knowledges out of the forms of appearance of intersecting actions and reactions.

Aesthetics is thus a distribution of the perceptible that establishes the political as a field of visibilities. Rancière's phrasing of the problem follows Kant,



“Escrache PAH” Photo, Marcelo Expósito

insofar as he asks about the conditions of possibility of experience, in order to work with it in a Foucauldian manner, starting from the question of the “a priori” that is no longer a given structure but rather an historical formation of knowledges – visibilities and enunciations – and thus to question how what can be ‘seen’ is shaped, and how this ‘seeing’ determines subjects’ participation in the political.

In the framework proposed by Rancière, there is an “aesthetics” at the core of politics, that can be understood “as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to experience” (Rancière 2000: 2013) but politics, in Rancière, has two meanings. On the one hand, *le politique*, or the political as translated in English, that can be identified with the police as the general law that determines the distribution of parts and roles in a community as well as its forms of exclusion. On other hand, *la politique*, or politics, “which only exists in intermittent acts of implementation that lack any overall principle or law, and whose only common characteristics is an empty operator: dissensus” (Rockhill 2004: 90).

The distinction is important, since it eliminates any “original” distribution. It is evident that any configuration of the community is historical and can be questioned in the enunciation on the part of certain subjects who have been defined excluded. Following Rancière's argument, one could say that the problem for the configuration of these subjects who “have a part in not having a part” is not the place they ‘naturally’ occupy outside the community, but rather the very law that determines what can be considered community.

It is clear that there is no given inside or outside. It is thus a ‘police’ that generates a determined politics of appearance where subjects are produced within a set of *dispositifs*, to use Foucault's term, from which the specific forms that circulate and give shape to specific distributions and classifications are established. If, however, we leave the frame of apprehension that marks this politics of appearance, we might be able to see other forms in which this figure appears in order to render the law of their appearing contradictory and assume a force that would require us to think of politics as a field of *action* rather than one of representation or identification:

I now propose to reserve the term *politics* for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part of those who have no part. [...] Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it

makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise. (Rancière 1999: 29-30)

Politics can be thought of as a manifestation that undoes the perceptible ordinations of the police order by way of a series of interventions that, through the idea of the actualization and corroboration of equality, allow the frames of appearance to be transformed so as to open up other fields of experience. This notion of politics breaks with classical and modern political theory, which seek their foundations in the community. Here, the only principle is that there is none, and that politics is an activity that makes it possible for the distribution of the perceptible to be questioned.

Rancière's argument about the "aesthetics of politics" is interesting, in that it makes possible a complication of Hannah Arendt's argument about the space of appearance since, through Rancière's distinction between politics and the political, appearance marks two moments: on the one hand, the logic of appearance as police, and on the other, its moment of contestation as politics. It is from this idea of appearance as action that it seems to me we can understand a part of that which is being activated in some of the occupations of space as protest that we have witnessed in recent years. This allows us not to fall into a kamikaze hope for revolt in which catharsis functions as a substitute for politics, but rather to think that, on some occasions, the rupture of logics, both of representation and of space, allows for the creation of political moments in which the moment of appearance supposes the possibility of questioning the logic of sovereignty and exception.

This text attempts to demonstrate that the foundation of politics upon the logic of sovereignty generates a politics of death where there is no possible assemblage, as a result of which it is necessary to think of other kinds



"1st of December 2012" Photo, Enrique Méndez de Hoyos.

of logics of the political in order to open other fields of subjectification that would generate other modes of emplacement. In this sense, the proposed view of politics as a space of appearance is important, but only if we understand that a double articulation is played out within it: on the one hand, a moment of normativity that generates a distribution and a dispensation that have an historical and not a "divine" or "ontological" foundation and, on the other, a moment of dispute, of a changing of grammar, of disidentification, that makes it possible to raise the distribution and forms of participation for discussion once more.

In this sense, something that allows us to think of the diverse occupations of space that are being generated around the world is that there is a claim for other logics of appearance, that there is a disagreement about the mode of distribution, participation and the very definition of life. It is important to emphasize that this space of appearance, to use Arendt's category, cannot be limited to the street or the plaza as Judith Butler has warned. In the case of Mexico, which is experiencing a "civil war", it is undeniable that because many

parts of the country are living under siege, the conditions for a possible occupation of space -in the classical sense- are very limited. It is impossible to reduce the appearing-as-space of politics to the occupation of the street. We must think of other forms of appear and of appearance beyond the moment of the "swarm." One interesting exercise that seems important to mention is "Bordamos por la paz"⁵, ["We Embroider for Peace"] Collective who, since 2011, have been creating a "memorial" of embroideries, which are made in both public and private spaces with the names of people who have been assassinated (red thread) and those who have disappeared (green thread). This collective, which has cells throughout the country and the world, works in a sustained way; it occupies public spaces and then withdraws; it collaborates with other groups and insists, through an almost artistic action, on generating a claim that confronts the lack of legal frames for death and forced disappearance. Space of appearance, thus, cannot be reduced to "occupation" of the street as it involves the constructions of the public sphere that can emerge in virtual spaces, artistic practices or other forms of the common.

In these "occupations" what is at stake is not a "new" political model, but rather a change in the conversation about what politics means. This is not to say that these mobilizations, for lack of a better term, should go on to create a change in structures, in the modes of governance, or in national trajectories. What is happening is of great complexity, given that these kinds of protests, encounters, and outbreaks – which are not articulated into a "social movement" in the classical sense – have a temporality and a conditioned duration because they respond to a rupture of order and of everyday life that always ends up ceding, whether due to police or military pressure, or from the very exhaustion of the bodies

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that expose themselves to extreme conditions. These spaces are not permanent, nor can they be. They are moments loaded with affectivity, emotion, imagination, rebellion, and empowerment, but that necessarily confront both the question of organization and the dilemma of what to do with respect to the law and rights. There are immensely interesting cases of processes that have been triggered or potentiated by the moment of outbreak or of “swarming”, but which supposed a different working logic. One of them is the Plataforma de Afectados por las Hipotecas (PAH, Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) in Spain, which has, for several years, created a platform of social work that attempts, by way of legal contestations and *escraches* [protests that target powerful individuals in their daily lives], to put a stop to evictions. PAH took to the streets in November 2010 with the Stop Evictions campaign, which gained even more momentum during the movement’s mobilizations on May 15 of that year. PAH became a meeting point for people in danger of losing their homes, organized locally by citizens and activists to provide legal advice and promote acts of civil resistance.⁶

What seems to be important, beyond moments of effervescence, is to attempt to work within what these processes open up, in the forms that appear – perhaps only to disappear – and to attempt at that point to undertake a slow, constant labor of inquiry, of critique, of imagination and of organization. It is a matter of not exhausting oneself in the difficulty of transforming current conditions – above all the articulation between economy and violence generated by capitalism – and



“Zócalo Mexico City, 1st of July 2012”. Photo, Francis Alÿs

toppling over into indifference or into extreme forms of direct action. After the repression of outbreaks, it is quite common for there to emerge forms of resistance closer to direct action, or in the case of countries with a long history of guerrilla warfare, to forms of uprising that run back into logics that are well-suited to power’s forms of representing “the enemy”.

In Mexico, the beginning of the new presidential cycle, 1st of December 2013, began with the demonstrations of self-described “anarchist” groups who have taken protest to be a space of direct action. Beyond formulating a judgment on these forms of confrontation, the question that arises is whether such operations can allow for the emergence of a political space. The very evocation of “anarchism” already signals the central problem, which is that such tactics are found in a type of classical political logic with which authoritarian governments, as is Mexico’s, know how to play very well: by polarizing civil society with media campaigns that discredit through fear: deploying, shock groups, infiltrators, political repression, etc. It is clear from the tragic cases of Libya, Egypt and Syria that the danger

of these appearances is that they clash with logics of power that do not want to lose, or to give up their forms of administration, and the consequence is war. In this sense, it seems important to maintain the battle for space, which does not assume the street to be the only form of appearance, but rather maintains tension out of paradoxical forms from which identification would be impossible; an appearance that would make possible subtle but constant operations from which working processes and processes of legal inscription and insertion could later be unleashed in order to be able to generate processes of a broader temporality, and where the curve of the outbreak would be a moment of explosion, but not the only way out.

The process of imagining a new politics will take time, and will not only depend on what appears but also on the work done with it, on knowing how to metabolize the energies of protest without succumbing to the daydream of catharsis, on being able to take ad absurdum the productions of representations and the distribution of places and functions in order to keep seeking the fissure where politics could be something beyond abandonment and exception.

NOTES

- 1 Translated by Dr. Christopher Michael Fraga
- 2 This text was developed thanks to the Postdoctoral Grants Program at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, during a Postdoc at the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, UNAM.
- 3 Confront messages that circulate on the web: “#CNTE teachers come from coastal states = dark-skinned, smelly and troublesome, coincidence? I think not.” (Twitter feed @Zorriitooo, August 27, 2013); “If I’m late to class tomorrow because of the CNTE’s gang of Indian servants, I’ll kill their children and rape their cunt wives (no, better to kill them)” (Twitter feed @RaulJMnz, August 23,

2013). Archived online at: <http://pbs.twimg.com/media/BSyJz3yCIAAY4uz.jpg> (accessed October 29, 2013).

4 Currently there are several research groups generating new methodologies that attempt to explain the great complexity of the uses of technology in these outbreaks and what seems to be a “technopolitical” logic that makes it possible to argue that the use of these channels greatly exceeds the simple viral moment, positing strategies and tactics that allow for a new political organization. See for example <http://datanalysis15m.wordpress.com/> (accessed October 29, 2013). This sort of analysis does not imply forgetting that the counterpart of the political uses of technology is the explosion of a market that collaborates with increasingly sophisticated forms of surveillance.

5 <http://bordamosporlapaz.blogspot.mx/>

6 See <http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com> (accessed October 29, 2013).