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PARIS, WALL STREET: REFLECTIONS ON THE POLITICAL CROWD AND LABELLING WORLD HISTORICAL EVENTS

Abstract

This paper examines the political crowd as a World Historical Event (WHE). Historian's define the latter as an episode, incident or emergency that transforms the course of history. The paper examines Hayden White's discussion of the WHE and the grounds he submits for separating it from pseudo-events. Namely, the identification of collective trauma and the attribution of the episode as the fulfilment or 'filling out' of an historical sequence.

The paper offers a preliminary taxonomy and concentrates on the non violent political crowd protest. It examines *Occupy* (2011) as a World Historical Event. It draws comparisons between Occupy, the Paris Commune (1871) and the May Spring in Paris (1968). The aim is to set the evidence about Occupy as a World Historical Event against claims made on its behalf by the media of the day and leading political and social commentators, notably David Harvey, Todd Gitlin, Cornell West and Noam Chomsky. The concept of 'Event inflation' is introduced and the claim that World Historical Events can only be determined by retrospective (historical) wisdom is advanced.

Key Words: Events, Occupy, Political Crowd, Non-Violent Process, Event Inflation

To Karl Marx we owe the wonderful phrase 'storming heaven' (1). He tossed it off casually in a letter written in 1871 with reference to the heroics of the Paris Commune (Marx and Engels 1955: 263). It comes to mind again as an appropriate term to capture the intensity of collective energy that bursts forth when the political crowd is an agent in a World Historical Event (WHE). The cadence of the political crowd stresses social

inclusion, and indignant sense of righteousness and irrepressible dynamism. It is different from a throng or a mob improvised out of happenstance. It beholds itself, and is beheld by key observers, as a primary agent, made up of compelling purpose driven by embedded, structural contradictions (2). Marx (1968) was well aware of the antinomies in the Paris Commune. Nevertheless, in its arrangements for new accountability in municipal government, its policies on rent, labour and the emancipation of women, he regarded it as an event of world importance: 'the harbinger of a new society', no less (Marx 1968:307).

In most cases, the general public has little difficulty in defining an event that changes history as distinct from other kinds of events, such as pseudo-events or mere news. What is impossible in terms of social positioning and ordering today, becomes 'the new normal' tomorrow (Matthewman 2015: 48-64). The interpretation of Events of this calibre carry strong Hegelian overtones. In the words of E.J. Hobsbawm (1978: 130) they are 'signposts'. That is, they appear to render transparent emerging forces and activate residual bonds that denote a change in direction for piloting and reproducing the general established hierarchy of social positioning and the social order upon which it rests, as well as providing bold directions for the future. At bottom, they consist

of incidents, episodes or emergencies that expose what might be termed, *confirmation problems* with the reproduction of ascendant order (Habermas 1976). Their primary identifying characteristic is that, *apres l' eventament*, the form of this order and the types of meaning that it produces are popularly acknowledged to be defunct. Experientially, the most obvious feature of WHE's is the collective recognition of a mass derailment in temporal order. By the term *temporal derailment* is meant the irretrievable disruption of conventional social and political institutions that afford people with a sense of the customary way of going about their business and redressing wrongs. It goes without saying that this is experienced as, first and foremost, the product of *habitus.* However, given the interpenetration of everyday association and practice with the media, the latter must, today, be acknowledged in the popular framing of meaning. To be sure, such is the pivotal role of the media in this regard, that the issue of event inflation immediately arises. Namely, the role of the media in enlarging the meaning of an Event in the social horizon to carry a contemporaneous historical merit that it does not warrant. In some instances, Event inflation may falsely portray an incident, episode or emergency as a WHE (3). Media framing attributes system-changing import to them.

Yet event legacy does not result in substantial rearrangements in resource allocation or strategies of legitimation. Later, the case of Occupy will be examined to develop these points and to address the question of the desiderata for the historically significant crowd.

Many epistemological issues are raised in labelling WHE's. These have to do with the scale of temporal derailment, the calibre of the social reaction to the Event and the monitoring and evaluation of Event legacies. It is upon interpretation of these issues that an historically significant WHE is separated from a pseudo-WHE. Here, Hayden White (2008: 18-20) makes two important claims. First of all, he links the status of a WHE with the psychoanalytic concept of trauma (4). As he observes, a trauma is a shock to the system. While the concept was developed by psychoanalyst's in relation to individual life history, he (*op cit*) maintains that it is legitimate for students of historical studies to extend it to collective experience. Just as individuals encounter shocks in everyday experience wherein things fall apart and the essentials no longer hold, so do wider social assemblages obey the same law i.e. groups and societies

In the second place, White (2008: 20) restores a sense of rational lineage to the notion of traumatic collective disturbance by observing that it is necessary to twin the

idea of a WHE with the concept of *double occurrence.* To continue, a WHE is an intimation of 'a filling out' or 'fulfilment' of a prior Event or Event sequence. Thus, the French Revolution (1789) might be said to be causally related to the 16th century Protestant Reformation (Wallerstein 1989). The causal relation in question is non-teleological. No defensible basis exists to hold that Luther made Robespierre inevitable. Rather, the 16th century challenge to established ecclesiastical power made the 18th century assault on the *Ancien Regime* one of a number of possibilities that might be realistically fulfilled, providing that cognate conditions apply. In other words, it created an historical opening that the tide of human action, based upon interpretation, might fill (but was not guaranteed to fill). The attribution of causal sequences is crucial. For it locates the WHE in a related pattern and *ipso facto*, liberates it from the idea of a one-off occurrence. Allied to this is the recognition that it is a key part of the business of the sociology of history to establish meaningful methodological principles to trace and explain the sequence.

What does it mean to derail temporal order? Edmund Husserl (1992) conceptualizes temporal order as multi-layered, complex and uneven. Time is a uniform standard but the experience of it is diverse and polyvalent. Each

moment carries different traces and sediments of experience and record, inflected through different viewpoints, and offering distinct vantages on history (Kern 2003; Harootunian 2007). On the subjective level, it can be readily comprehended that temporal derailment accompanies shock experience e.g. the bereavement of a loved one,life-threatening illness, job loss, bankruptcy and similar forms of personal grief. In contrast, WHE's are anti-systemic incidents or episodes that radically override habitual, uneven, multi-layered temporal dimensions and are understood to traumatically divert the course of collective history. Unlike personal shock, (that has a character determined by subjective conditions), the decisive quality of them is that they operate as the objective benchmark against which the trajectories of inter-subjective readings of history are comprehended and mapped. At inter-penetrating political, cultural and historical levels, interpretation is in consensus that the Event reveals that insurmountable confirmation problems face the social system. In response, more than fine-tuning is required. Fundamental rearrangements of resource allocation and strategies of legitimation become requisite.

There are three types of WHE's:

Natural Events: an act of Nature, such as an earthquake, a tsunami, a hurricane or a drought, that disrupts

normative order. Examples include, the Lisbon Earthquake (1755), the Galveston Hurricane (1900) and the Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004). There is controversy about whether disasters of this type today, are strictly speaking, 'natural'. For example, some commentators maintain that the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina (2005) on the Gulf Coast was 'sub-optimal' (Hartman and Squires 2008; Wise 2006: 302; Moynihan 2012: 851). The 'War Against Terror' is alleged to have diverted leadership and funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) dealing with disaster relief to anti-terrorist surveillance and policing issues falling under the public remit of the Department of Homeland Security (Sylves 2006). As a result flood defences were not robust and hazard mitigation services were lackadaisical in responding to National Hurricane Center warnings of a severe weather front.

Mass Atrocities, namely events that involve intense, mass human suffering that cause generalized repugnance against a political regime. What made the Holocaust different from other examples of mass atrocity in human history is the global acknowledgement that it changed the rules of the game. After knowledge of the holocaust became public the way humans thought of violence, science and suffering changed. The same is true of the Gulag, the executions

in Cambodia under Pol Pot and, more recently, the
Srebrenica massacre.

Political Anti-systemic Events that challenge the
legitimacy of elite domination and the hierarchy of
social positioning and the inter-connected field of
social order by exposing structural contradictions in the
system. It is useful to divide this category into
violent and *non-violent* challenges. Examples of violent
challenges include the American Revolution (1776), the
French Revolution (1789) and the Bolshevik Revolution
1917. Here physical force is decisively invested to
uproot established power regimes. Examples of non-violent
challenges include the Shanghai Communes (1927, 1967),
the protests in Paris and Prague (1968), the dismantling
of the Berlin Wall and the so-called 'Velvet Revolution'
in the Eastern European Command States (1989), the May
the 4th Protests (1919) and more recently, the *Arab Spring*
(2011) and the *Occupy* demonstrations (2011-12)
(Wallerstein 1989; Kramer 2011). Physical force is not
necessarily absent from these uprisings. The spring
revolts in Paris and Prague had their share of violent
incidents. Likewise, the *Occupy* demonstrations involved
cases of violence between protesters and the police, and
vice versa. Blame for the most serious disturbances in
Oakland have been laid at the door of members of the
Black Bloc anarchist group who were alleged to have

infiltrated the movement (Hedges 2012). However, they were exceptions to the rule. The stamp of *Occupy* and of non-violent challenges in general, consists of militant, peaceful protest.

This paper focuses upon anti-systemic WHE's, with particular reference to differentiating a genuine WHE from a pseudo WHE. How are these Events distinguished from pseudo-WHE's? To what extent is their cultural significance a matter of representation over substance? What role do they have in altering the *steering capacity* of the state apparatus (and the vested interests behind it) (Habermas 1976)? Before taking up these questions, some more words are necessary to describe the nature of non-violent WHE's.

Logistics of Temporal Derailments

To classify an Event as changing the course of human history is no small thing. Events like the First World War (1914-18), the Bolshevik Revolution (1917), World War Two (1939-45), the founding of the People's Republic of China (1948), are readily accepted as WHE's. The main reason for this is that they impacted upon the lives of many millions of people. The quantitative scale of Event legacy is therefore a common basis for classifying an incident as a WHE. But scale alone is insufficient.

Sometimes comparatively localized events possess a payload in altering temporal order that is only fully evident with hindsight.

For example, even today, the Paris Commune (1871) is widely remembered as a daring leap into internationalism. Most historians challenge the Romantic reading of the Commune as a simple expression of working class revolutionary sentiments (Starr 2006; Bowd 2015; Stedman Jones 2016). The Commune was a fissile ensemble of unstable factions. It embraced hubristic Republicans intent on avenging the humiliation of the provisional government at the hands of the Prussians after the Franco-Prussian war, radical bourgeois agitators, Jacobins, socialists of the International, revolutionaries of the Blanquist tendency, feminists, trade unionists, small-time rentier capitalists who had seen their income dry-up during the siege of Paris and, of course, common or garden wage labourers (Harvey 1985: 234-5; Tombs 1991; Stedman Jones 2016: 494-510). Nonetheless, for the three months that the barricades were manned, the ascendant cadence of the Commune was solidarity and unity of purpose. As everyone knows, the Commune was eventually crushed by the bloody intervention of state forces, led by the 'monstrous gnome', Adolphe Thiers (Marx 1968: 274) . However, there is general agreement that it left a massive, enduring legacy. For

the centrist Left, its defeat was interpreted as a lesson that parliamentary politics is a more fruitful forum of change (Starr 2006). In this sense, it inadvertently contributed to the *confirmation* of the existing balance of power in French society. However, the ramifications of the revolt in putting into practice new forms of civic governance and respect for difference went well beyond Paris or France. This, and the martyrdom of Communards at the hands of the state (it is estimated that between 6,000-7,000 died), made the event apocalyptic in the world history of socialism (Tombs 2012). Marxists celebrate it as an heroic example of working class energy, sacrifice and daring (Mann 2011: 14). Feminists respect it as a pioneering foray against patriarchy (Eichner 2004). Labour leaders of the day in Britain and the USA defended the uprising against the conservative press and affirmed the 'general righteousness' of the Communards and the historical significance of the Event (Bernstein 1951: 144-51). The Commune was a genuine WHE. It demonstrated to governments and agents of transformation that a widescale temporal derailment of social order and the realignment of hierarchy of social positioning are possible and further, that the French system of capitalism faced inherent long term confirmation problems in respect of legitimacy, stability and prosperity. It was venerated for so doing, by both

Lenin and Mao. During the Bolshevik Revolution and in the history of Soviet communism, just as in the Civil War in China, the Commune was honoured as a signal event in the traceable sequence of internationalism making successful revolution possible (Bowd 2015; Stedman Jones 2016). The true significance of the Commune as a WHE was only fully apparent with hindsight.

Needless to say, subsequent Events claimed the mantle of the Commune. That is, they presumed and presented themselves as system-changing, historically significant, incidents and emergencies that derail temporal order. To stay with the case of Paris, Katsiaficas (1987) compares the *eventaments* in Paris, Prague and other cities that occurred nearly a century later, in the spring of 1968, with WHE's such as the Revolutions in 1848 and 1905. He (1087: 230) maintains that the *soixante huitards* prefigured the anti-bureaucratic, democratic society of the future in which 'the Good, the True and the Beautiful' will be fused. Like its 1871 predecessor, the political crowd in Paris in 1968 was a decidedly mixed assembly. It consisted of students, workers, Marxists, feminists, Trotskyites, Maoists, anti-Viet Nam War protesters, anti-Colonialists, Situationist's, Existentialists, Surrealists and Anarchists. A good deal of confusion abounded about the nature of their collective demands. Of course, a general decentralization

of power was envisaged, but in what shape, and in what proportion, remains unclear. Workers self-management and grass-root participatory democracy in civil society, presumably through some revised version of the commune structure, were proclaimed to be necessities. Yet the accent of the May Spring was also upon larger, unspecified transformations. 'Be realistic: Demand the Impossible' was one of the May movement's characteristic and notorious slogans. It is surely questionable if the doctrine of unity was viable in the long term. For, in the exaltation of the revolutionary moment, it ignored deeper question of social divisions. There is still dispute over the meaning and legacy of the Paris spring. The 1968 protests have been credited with a legacy of enhancing worker, consumer and student rights and contributing to the anti-war movement and, more broadly, building a new, enduring critique of power (Hamon and Rotman 1987; 1988). Other critics are less sanguine. They point to the Eurocentric character of the *soixante huitards* (Hendrickson 2012). The militancy in Paris and Prague mostly focused on issues in Europe. The protesters were largely white and preoccupied with domestic issues. The revolutionary credentials of the movement have also been attacked. It is alleged that the protest was more in the nature of a vehicle of self dramatization than real political transformation (Caute 1988: 35). This

played into the hands of the new Right and, unintentionally, precipitated the neo-liberal revolution of deregulation that commenced in the 1980s (Caute 1988: 462). At the end of the day, President De Gaulle made limited concessions to the workers and students and proclaimed, a new election that swept him back into power. Am accommodation with what had been castigated as the primary forces of repression was reached. The Paris Spring is therefore most accurately viewed as a case of *system interruption*, rather than a genuine temporal derailment that negated system confirmation.

Event Inflation

Much of Marx's (1968) understanding of the rise and fall of the Paris Commune depended upon newspaper bulletins. By the time of the Paris Spring (1968) the public was already schooled to the mighty power of the media to communicate not only data about events in the world but moral interpretations of them as well. For Durkheim (1915), the ultimate moral force in society is religion. Long before 1968, the media had assumed this role. They provide most ordinary people a moral compass for evaluating the historical significance of world news. Event inflation was inevitably bound up with this. Big news boosted the account books of media corporations. So

18 with a new sectionit is understandable that some
sections of the media sought to find big news where none
existed and exaggerated the importance of system
interruptions as game changing historical events.
In our own day, to offer a balance sheet of the legacies
of the *Arab Spring* (2010-12) and *Occupy* (2011-12) is
premature. At the time, many sections of the media
presented both events as changing the rules of the game
in international geo-politics. As the aforementioned
case of the Paris Commune demonstrates, the
classification of an incident or emergency as a WHE, is
often a matter of retrospective wisdom. However, to date,
the signs are that the media response to the Arab Spring
and Occupy was one of Event Inflation. With the exception
of Tunisia, the changes in the countries caught up in the
Arab Spring were *regime interruptions.* Religious and
tribal enmities were not uprooted and discarded, as the
current bloodshed in Syria and Iraq tragically
demonstrates. As for Occupy, the 99% did not deprive the
1% of power. The banks resumed an unchallenged role in
managing capitalist finance. Central to this was the
steady advance of austerity politics in the European
Union and North America, with the concomitant
implications on housing, education, health and recreation
for the masses. At present, it is impossible to disagree
with Fuchs that the media exaggerated both the historical

outcomes of the protests and the 'mobilization

capacities' of the social media (Fuchs 2014: 84-5).

For reasons of space, the development of these points

must be confined to a discussion of the trajectory taken

by the *Occupy* movement. For *Occupy* the attack on the 1%

was understood to be a civic duty (Maharawal 2011). The

protests and occupations were portrayed not as the work

of dissidents or revolutionaries, but of the *élan vital*

of the overwhelming majority against intolerable

inequality. The sub-prime housing crisis, the escalating

costs of higher education, shoddy and inadequate welfare

provision, the military adventurism of the power elite in

control of the USA, all figured as prominent,

'commonsensical' rallying points for righteous protest.

The criticism of power and inequality was fairly

conventional, but the multi-modal, horizontal form of

protest was widely interpreted as distinctive and novel.

Amidst echoes of Dust-bowl anguish and despair from the

1930s, there was what can only be termed a rarefied

accent on the high-tech aspects of the demonstrations.

Digital exchange was portrayed as the catalyst for

genuine, rhizomatic politics, offering unprecedented

levels of participation and spontaneity in urban-

industrial settings (5). The political crowd here

retained some of the features of spatial proximity (in

occupations and meetings). Similarly, print publications

were important. *Occupied WJS, Occupy!, N+1* and local
think pieces and broadsheets played the role of
transmission belts of opinion. However, high tech,
digital exchange networks figured prominently
in self-reporting accounts of the origins and momentum of
the *Occupy* demonstrations as constituting a new type of
popular politics (Schmitt, Taylor and Greif 2011;
Schrager Lang and Lang/Levitsky 2012). Digital technology
was widely credited with enabling new, non-hierarchical
forms of collective action that do not require spatial
concentration or the leadership mechanism. The high tech,
non-hierarchical accent carried over into the process of
policy formation and collective action. The decision-
making body of *Occupy* was the General Assembly. That is,
the political crowd was conceived, and respected, as
realizing the attributes of the Ancient Greek *agora*,
now in a high urban-industrial setting. Live streams, the
People's Mic and the mobile phone combined to produce an
ethos of equal, participatory activism that facilitators
pointedly contrasted with the discredited machinery of
Party politics. The movement was not interested in
founding a political party or appointing a secretariat to
develop a five year plan. Instead it adhered to a
philosophy of horizontalism (from *horizontalidad,* the
system of organization used by protesters in Argentina in
2001, who ejected five consecutive elected governments

and created new neighbourhood assemblies. Horizontalism
stands for self management, autonomy and direct democracy
(Sitrin 2012: 74). According to Kalle Lasn (McLauchlan
2013: 8), the founder and editor-in-chief of *Adbusters,*
(the magazine that is generally acknowledged to be the
catalyst for *Occupy Wall Street*), *Occupy* was committed to
moving away from 'negative' and 'reactionary' politics to
a more positive transformative politics. This involves
the redefinition of public relations and private life.
'Occupy yourself', 'Occupy theory', 'Occupy art' are
conceived of as no less important than 'Occupy Wall
Street' or 'Occupy Your Local Bank'. Evidently, a
revolution of the soul was envisaged. This consisted of
the emancipation of forms of identity, practice and
association that have already emerged at the margins
under the repressive rule by 'the 1%'. This liberation
was seen as the prelude to new, enriching forms of human
co-operation and growth. Moreover, repression was not
regarded as confined to the unemployed, welfare
claimants, ethnic minorities and other so-called
'peripheral' groups. On the contrary, the polarization
between the 1% and the 99% extended repression to apply
as the general civic condition of the *polis,* including
the all important group of the middle class. The new
movements of challenge and social transformation purport
to break with the necessities of spatial concentration,

management and leaders. They profess to be leaderless networks constituted around a rhizomatic culture to provide popular solutions to public ills.

The notorious manifesto of *The Invisible Committee* (2009), *The Coming Insurrection,* anticipates many features of the attack against elite power that was the *sine qua non* of *Occupy* (6). It revives the notion of the Commune as the favoured unit of radical change. The Commune is understood to be anti-bureaucratic, non-hierarchical and committed to the elimination of economic dependence and political subjugation (The Invisible Committee 2009: 102). Ordinary conceptions of communes are posited in the notion of collections of passionately committed, resolute revolutionaries that aim to overthrow the system. The position taken by *The Invisible Committee* (2009) certainly retains the emphasis on passion and overthrowing the system. However, it resists assigning privileged status to physical mobilization in concrete settings. Digital technology, particularly the mobile phone, offers a high tech means through which the Ancient Greek *agora* can be realized in urban-industrial settings that hitherto, have been associated with privatization, division and anonymity. Linkage through nodes and networks is distributed globally, and accomplished, in deterritorialized, settings as well as high profile public spaces. Since neither hierarchy nor

party machine are involved, the notion of spontaneity in politics is super-enriched.

This raises separate questions about the challenges in policing a political movement based upon rhizomatic exchange. *Occupy* believed itself to be irrepressible because it cannot be halted by evictions from occupied space, arrests or prison sentences. Digital nodes and networks are inherently mobile and flexible. When challenged by external force they simply reconfigure around new servers and continue to promote the exchange of ideas and foment dissent. This is why those involved in *Occupy* confidently assert that it was just to submit that a 'new, radical imagination' has been born and is being disseminated. In the words of Prashad (2011: 204):

> This new radical imagination forces us to break with the liberal desires for reform of a structure that can no longer be plastered over, as termites have already eaten into its foundation. It forces us to break with multicultural upward mobility that has both succeeded in breaking the glass ceiling, and at the same time demonstrated its inability to operate on behalf of the multitudes. Neither liberal reform nor multiculturalism. We require something much deeper, something more radical.

This is beyond Left and Right with a vengeance. The rethinking of collective politics that achieved such a high profile in the 1990s and early part of this century with 'Third Way' and 'Communitarian' arguments at the helm, appears to have all of its thunder stolen (Giddens 1998, 2000; Etzioni 2001). Instead of an articulated middle ground, painstakingly constructed through public meetings, representative politics and leaders, the rhizomatic politics of *Occupy* are held to offer the immediate expression of heartfelt, spontaneous, unifying emotions 'from below' simultaneously on interpenetrating local, national and global level. Essential to the logic of the movement was the abandonment of a stakeholder mentality in favour of an alliance of the repressed.

The momentous significance attributed to the *Occupy* event was not restricted to the media. Many prominent academics contended that *Occupy* was a WHE in the making. Thus, David Harvey (2012: 164) declared, 'a struggle has broken out – that of the People versus the Party of Wall Street.' The implication is that the occupations are the commencement of wider structural conflicts, the escalation of unrest and perhaps revolutionary transformation.

Todd Gitlin (2012a, 2012b) credits *Occupy* - 'conceivably' – with major and lasting social transformation. '*Occupy*,' he (2012a: 227) writes, 'could evolve into an enduring

force, an awakening that like its predecessors in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in the sixties, irreversibly changes the values that Americans live by.'

Cornell West (2011) maintains that *Occupy* is a 'deep, democratic awakening' and an 'idea whose time has come'. He submits that it has shifted the ground of public discourse by bringing questions of oligarchic power, truth, justice, corporate greed, wealth inequality, arbitrary police powers especially in low income districts and arbitrary military power.

Noam Chomsky (2012: 24) submits, 'The *Occupy* movement is an extremely exciting development. In fact, it's kind of spectacular. It's unprecedented. There's never been anything like it that I can think of. If the bonds and associations that are being established in these remarkable events can be sustained … it could turn out to be a really historic, and very significant moment.'

To date, with hindsight, these statements suggest that Event Inflation is not confined to the media. Many academics, caught up in the heat of the moment, are willing to confuse system interruption with system rupture. In making this confusion, the high tech metaphor of digital communication was highly significant. For example, Manuel Castells (2012: 171) described *Occupy* as 'a hybrid, networked movement that links cyberspace

and urban space in multiple forms of communication'
(Castells 2012: 171) For Castells, the suppression of
one gateway of communication (eviction from occupied
public space, the blanking of Livestreams) does not
necessarily imperil adjoining gateways (7). To be sure,
it may give birth to new platforms and highways of
connectivity. This communicates a sense that the
grievances and aspirations of *Occupy* are irrepressible.
High tech revolt outstrips the power of effective
policing. System-changing non-violent WHE's now have the
technical means to 'fill out' or 'fulfil' alternative
political meanings that have been in circulation for a
long time.

Yet even among commentators who are broadly sympathetic
with the aims of *Occupy*, questions have been flagged
about the transparency of the movement's objectives, the
viability of horizontalism, the credibility of the notion
of 'spontaneous revolution', the solidity of the concept
of 'the 99%', the sustainability of the movement's
transformative power and the genuine generative power of
user-generated social media and social networking (such
as *Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, Tumblr, Livestream*) to
build and accomplish durable change (Gamson and Siffry
2013).

The conceptual articulation for which *Occupy* is most
famous is the antagonism between the 1% and the 99%.

Frustratingly, it is a polarization that neglects to engage with divisions of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion and status. As theorists of the crowd submit, in the moment of revolutionary fervour, and before the threat of resistance from the established authorities, such matters are temporarily neutralized (Le Bon 1895; Rude 1981; Moscovici 1985). The effect is enhanced when the multi-modal political crowd is conceived of as a deterritorialized agent. For, by virtue of being distributed in various settings which are not contemporaneously visible, and hence immune to effective policing, the social, political, economic, cultural and religious characteristics of the crowd are cloaked in obscurity. The result is that the unity of recruitment, integration of membership and solidity of antagonism may be tremendously exaggerated. Runciman (2012) notes that the break between the 1% and the rest is an annual household income of $350,000 per year. In the USA the current average household income is $51,914 (gov/qfd/states/00000.html); while in the UK, according to the *Office for National Statistics* the average media income for a household in 2011 was £359 per week (a fall from £373 per week in 2010)(www.ons.gov.uk). Observation and intuition dictate that it would be unwise to predict a close correlation between the beliefs, values, opinions

and practices of the US/UK average and higher household income groups below the $350,000 barrier.

Similarly, the notion that horizontalism is sustainable exists in some tension with sociological traditions which emphasize that democratic organization cannot, in the long run, avoid the concentration of power at the top (Michels 1962; Keane 2009). As we have seen, *Occupy* favoured a direct type of democracy, based, ultimately, upon the Ancient Greek precedent of the *agora*, rather than elected, representative government. It disavowed conventional systems of party political organization and recoiled from any attempt to instantiate them (Harcourt 2012). It was militantly inclusive, permitting demonstrators dissatisfied with the state-corporate nexus, universities, welfare offices and banks to gather together under one banner. Now, critics submit that the improvisational structure of horizontalism, the lack of a coherent programme of demands and the absence of a management hierarchy capable of formulating strategy, combined to hobble the movement. For example, internal fragmentation was apparent in strike action that project and affinity groups have taken against each other (Schneider 2012: 14).

The structural independence of *Occupy* from specialization (the seat of hierarchy) has also been questioned. Despite appearances and propaganda, *Occupy* was not a

flat, non-hierarchical movement. True, decisions were
realized through meetings of the General Assembly (GA)
i.e. the aggregate of demonstrators. However, the conduct
of the GA was serviced by two groups of facilitators that
supplied the Assembly with data and policy options.
Commissions acted as tools to maintain the viable
existence of the movement. For example, they dealt with
Media, Legal, Food, Outreach, Security, Sanitation,
Medical, Finance/Resources, Programmming and Social Media
functions. *Working Groups* acted as think tanks and
discussion gateways addressing questions of politics,
economics, culture and media representation.

The facilitation of these means and purposes requires
disciplined, responsible agency in the form of
switchboards that communicated between groups and
planning sessions to determine matters of importance to
be put to the GA. *Occupy* develped a 'Spokes Council'
model to achieve this (Castells 2012: 182-3). Spokes are
individuals authorized by Commissions and Working groups
to represent their views. They are intended to perform
an enabling role in maintaining gateways of communication
and efficient resource distribution.

There is obvious room for abuse here. Among the questions
that arise are, how impartial are Spokes? What are the
checks and balances against the development of hidden
agendas? How can Spokes be prevented from exchanging a

facilitator function for an advocacy role? These issues were never satisfactorily resolved in Occupy. Some 99'ers feared that Spokes, Commissions and Working Groups were embryonic forms of hierarchical, directive leadership that would eventually confirm the famous 'iron law of oligarchy' (Michels 1962).

Certainly, if knowledge is power, both Commissions and Working Groups possessed competitive advantage in framing agendas and fields of discussion to encourage preferred readings in the GA. It is unnecessary to allege outright manipulation and further, there is no proof to substantiate the allegation. However, merely by arranging and ranking data, preferred outcomes could be stamped with consensus.

Occupy suggested a radically decentralized *agora*-style of public government. But it is not clear that this style of decision making and, in general, this way of going about things, is sustainable in contemporary society. Gellner (1988) argued that the scope for the political organization of complex urban-industrial societies is limited by unavoidable functional imperatives. All societies face questions of production, coercion and cognition. These do not disappear with the arrival of livestreaming and the People's Mic. It was a lesson learned in the heady days of the Paris Commune (1871). The Commune's appointment to take charge of the

Bibliotheque Nationale, Citizen Jules Vincent, was
dismissed from his post after one third of the budget
under his control disappeared (Greenberg 2007).
Similarly, the Commune's financial expert, Jourde,
cautiously advised the comrades to sue for swift
restoration of business confidence, the reduction of city
taxes, while doubling the education budget and
implementing measures to prevent stock market
speculation. From Jourde's perspective, and comrades who
thought like him, this was an impeccable counsel of
prudence in revolutionary times. For the
internationalists it was bloodless, piecemeal concession-
mongering, akin to the pitiable nibbling of a mouse
rather than the roar of a lion (Price 1972: 79).
Gellner's standpoint IS supported by a variety of
experts, writing in other areas of political economy,
maintains that democratic order rests upon the
confirmation of principles of impartial executive
capacity, stability, control, governability and
concentrated power as legitimate (Held 1976; Beetham
1989; Judge 2006).

Conclusion: The 'Historically Significant Crowd'

What then, are the functional imperatives of a non-
violent WHE? While granting the potential for exchange,

communication and action afforded by social media, it is important not to get carried away and postulate, upon their means, spontaneity above disciplined organization, manifest destiny over leadership, and the spirit of divine justice over coherent, tangible goals. In these respects it is perhaps safe to propose that the resources of the historiography of crowds and social movements has not quite been rendered obsolete by the tablet and the smart phone. In an effort to distinguish what he terms the 'historically significant' crowd from crowds drawn together to be entertained, to participate in ceremonial occasions, or engage in insignificant outbursts of mass hysteria, George Rude (1981: 5) identified three features (8). Briefly, they are *organized* movements, dedicated to the accomplishment of *well-defined objectives* and propelled by *acknowledged leaders*. *Par excellence,* he had in mind the labour movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He submitted that the aforementioned characteristics render the historically significant 'industrial crowd' categorically distinct from 'the pre-industrial crowd'. Of course, the pre-industrial political crowd has the capacity to decompose the interests of the established power regime. Nonetheless, for Rude's (1981), because it is in want of the material and democratically accountable means to create genuine egalitarianism, it cannot avoid the historical cul-de-sac

of replacing one tyranny with another. The industrial crowd alone possesses the historical knowledge and psychological rigour to afford a secular, democratic, transcendent solution to structural contradictions. It alone possesses the capacity to liberate collective wealth and potentially build a political and economic system in which equality, liberty and justice may flourish. Some remnants of Durkheim's (1915: 427-8) notion of the collective effervescence of the crowd, in which individuals are 'carried outside' themselves and 'diverted from ordinary occupations and preoccupations' survive here. For Rude (1981) then, the shape and form of the industrial political crowd are determined by questions of setting, numbers, and leadership. Additionally, the analysis assumes that physical proximity and face to face contact are the lifeblood of the effective political crowd.

On this reckoning, the recent *Arab Spring* (2011) and the *Occupy* demonstration (2011-12) are aberrations. They fail to satisfy Rude's criteria to merit 'historical significance'. To be specific: they are not organized movements; they do not have well-defined goals (especially an integrative transcendent vision); and they eschew leaders in preference for an ideal of 'horizontal' action. More closely they approximate to collections of diffuse, contingent interests cloven together by

capricious circumstances that supports exasperation with the moral, political and economic foundations of the power regime that runs the system. In fine, the *Arab Spring* (2011) and *Occupy* (2011-12) resemble Marcuse's (1964) concept of 'the Great Refusal' (9). That is, general antipathy to the continuation of the system in its present form, without a well defined organizational structure or plausible alternative. It follows that the attribution of a WHE in relation to them is misplaced. For Rude (1981), collective disturbances of this type have time-limited consequences. They may expose a confirmation crisis in the political mechanics of rule that, in turn, may elicit discrete adaptive consequences. They do not constitute an historical break with the system because they lack the conditions of discipline, leadership and a coherent programme of goals capable of producing a compelling alternative.

Despite their many and notable differences the political crowds empowering the *Arab Spring* and *Occupy* are united in positing insuperable legitimation problems for the respective dominant power regimes. The absence of well-defined organizational discipline, and imprecision over the question of what comes next, are secondary to the emotional insistence that the current situation is intolerable. If we cast around for a compelling metaphor to distinguish the *Arab Spring* and *Occupy* from the

industrial political crowd, *modality* has persuasive
qualifications. The mode of the political industrial
crowd is physical combination, mobilization and action.
The political crowd in the Arab Spring and *Occupy* is
multi-modal (Castells 2012). That is, physical proximity
is only one mode through which activism is conveyed and
developed. Digital exchange, television news reports and
live streams are correlative modes. This has
consequences, not only for the trajectory of crowd
behaviour, but for the policing and strategy provisions
of the authorities. Does this mean that WHE's involving
the non-violent political crowd today must be rethought
from first principles? For while these crowds do not
match the criteria set out by Rude (1981), they can have
consequences with regard to temporal order that were not
anticipated by him.

To date, what may be professed with a degree of
equanimity, is that the available facts in no way verify
the proposition. In social movements dedicated to
progressive social change, social media have not made
the functional imperatives of leadership, discipline and
tangible goal-formation obsolete. It follows that the
organization of historically significant crowds as
catalysts of non-violent WHE's, cannot continue
profitably if these imperatives are relegated to the
dustbin of 'pre-history'. Bey0nd doubt, at our present

level of knowledge, it is an open question whether social media add or subtract to 'Event inflation'. We live in an age wherein the institutionalized media and social media, mostly, convey the world to us as a hail-storm of convulsive events, incidents, episodes and emergencies. Since the excesses of the postmodern 'moment' in the 1990's, it has become customary to scoff at Baudrillard's invocation that to understand life today we must first, understand the ubiquity of *hyperreality* in media representations of events and inter-personal experience (Baudrillard (1986; 2002: 3-4)(10). For the nonce, a just interpretation of contemporary media accounts of WHE's in the aggregate, and their relationships with Event Inflation, must, respectfully, beg to differ.

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(1)   Interestingly, in another letter written at the
      time he reprimands his addressee L.Kugelmann for
      confusing the 'petty bourgeois demonstrations *a la*
      June 13, 1849 with 'the present struggle in Paris'
      (Marx 1955: 264). Evidently, Marx was working with
      an early, unarticulated distinction between World
      Historical Events and pseudo events.

(2)   This consciousness is not spontaneous. It
      requires the facilitation of leaders and
      communicators. The catalyst for the *Occupy Wall
      Street* (2011) occupations is generally accepted
      to be the Vancouver based counter-culture
      organization, *Adbusters*.

 (3) Event inflation refers to the exaggeration of an
      episode, incident or emergency by the media or
      academic commentators. The attribution of WHE's
      is a constant battle between instant punditry
      and retrospective (historical) wisdom.

 (4) In psychoanalysis, trauma is understood as any
      external 'excitation' that fractures the
      'defense shield' of order (Freud 1984:301).
      The recognition of the Holocaust as a WHE is
      clearly bound up with trauma (Alexander 2002).

(5) The concept of 'rhizome' has become fashionable
through the work of Deleuze and Guattari
(1980). If refers to non-hierarchical
exchange. Exchange in this respect encompasses
non-human and well as human interrelations.

(6) 'The Invisible Committee' were identified with
the Tarnac Nine i.e. a group of alleged
anarchist terrorists arrested in the village of
Tarnac, France in November 2008.

(7) Livestreams enabled protesters to transmit real
time audio-visual data over the web providing
up-dates on police tactics. Thus, in no sense
can the enforced eviction of demonstrators from
public space be said to have crushed the
movement. It remains ongoing through digital
networks that enable it, when conditions
permit, to reassert itself in public space. For
the authorities, policing of multi-modal agents
is a daunting challenge.

(8) The title of Rude's (1981, originally published
in 1964) is misleadingly titled. 'The Crowd in

History 1730-1848' is exclusively concerned
with episodes in British and French history.

(9) Craig Calhoun (2013) first made the observation
that certain behavioural characteristics of
Occupy were reminiscent of Marcuse's concept of
'The Great Refusal' at Todd Gitlin's BJS
lecture at the LSE 'Occupy's Predicament', 18
October 2012.

(10) Hyperreality refers to the convergence between
reality and simulation, authenticity and mass
reproduction.

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