# THE EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH POPULAR RADICAL PRESS AND TODAY'S ANTI-CAPITALIST PROTEST MOVEMENT

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## Introduction

The early nineteenth-century English popular radical press and today's anti-capitalist protest movement have conflict and trauma in common, and both involve change. Cultural and social change is an intrinsically dynamic process which builds upon pre-existing foundations. It is, therefore, crucial to explore the connections between present-day protest movements and past political and cultural traditions in order to understand the present through the past.

The current paper stresses the role played by marginal voices in the process of social and cultural change. One of these voices, "Occupy Wall Street" (OWS), deserves special attention. As a movement that questions global financial capitalism, OWS has redirected political focus, not only by physically occupying the emblematic centre of power in America, but also by elevating the issue of economic inequality to the forefront of public attention. OWS exhibits exciting forms of political and social expression. The occupation of the public space, the denunciation of corruption, and the value put upon democratic principles and on the free circulation of ideas link this movement to other past dissenters. The action of OWS is part of a long heritage of resistance against injustice and oppression. This connectedness – acknowledged by the *Declaration of the Occupation of New York City* (*DO-NYC*)[1] – is one of the most engaging aspects of OWS. The heritage goes back not only to the movements cited in the *Preface* of the above-mentioned *DO-NYC* – the "Diggers" in

1 This document was transcribed in its entirety and edited by Lex Rendon, Ryan Hoffman, and the Call to Action Working Group, and accepted by the NYC General Assembly, on 29 September 2011.

England during the tumultuous 1640,[2] the Paris Commune in 1871, and the workers' militias in Barcelona in 1936 – but also to the political and cultural traditions of English popular radicalism.[3] This relationship is visible in the texts produced by the authors and publishers of the London popular radical press.[4] English popular radicalism was not just a movement of resistance; it looked forward to the future.

Two features of popular radical culture are present in today's anti-capitalist movements: the capacity to define a mobilising, forward-looking political agenda and the defence of the freedom of the press often carried out in a mock-satirical style. The radical intervention did, in effect, define extensive parliamentary reform as their political agenda and the defence of the freedom of speech and of the press as its most important instrument. The personal courage displayed by many radicals in court and prison in defence of the freedom of the press has contributed decisively to the expansion of the public sphere – a condition for the type of political and cultural change envisaged. That is the reason why the struggle for the freedom of the press is rightly considered the crowning glory of popular radicalism.

The challenges faced today by representative democracy reveal the pertinence of these aspects of the radical legacy.[5] Hence, radical journalism and satire were not the last expression of a blackguard subculture, but a cultural heritage that sheds light on and gives meaning to some politico-cultural movements in the present day public-sphere. Ripples of that tradition were kept alive

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2 The "New Putney Debates", organized by "Occupy London", and held between Wednesday 15th October and Saturday 15th November 2014, were inspired by the Levellers' and Diggers' demands for social justice, civil rights and equal access to the land. The venue for some events was St. Mary's Church in Putney, the place where the original Debates started on 28 October 1647.

3 The phrase "English popular radicalism" refers to the politico-cultural movement for parliamentary reform that put forth its roots in the 1790s through the publication of Thomas Paine's seminal work *Rights of Man*, followed by the first artisan associations such as the London Corresponding Society, the emergence of the unstamped press and the great popular mobilisations of that revolutionary decade.

4 Henceforth referred to simply as "radical press". Though we can find radical periodicals in the provinces, i.e. the influential *Manchester Observer*, or the *Sheffield Register*, the radical press was essentially the London radical press. It included many textual typologies – ranging from the satirical pamphlet to trial reports, advertisements, satirical prints, toasts, and songs – but the heart of the radical press was the radical periodical, a journal of political comment, made popular among the working people by William Cobbett in 1816.

5 As tragically seen in the terrorist attacks on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, France, on 8th January 2015.

and carried through Victorian society into the present in coffee-houses, pubs, squibs, songs, and the Sunday press. Radicals helped influence modernity.

The present study aims to reveal that heritage. Section one – "the occupation of physical and intellectual space" – presents the strategies, modes and sites of both the seminal OWS movement and popular radicalism, the latter viewed fundamentally as a print culture. Section two – "planting the seeds of change" – identifies and interprets the common ground between present day protest and early nineteenth century popular radicalism. It examines the texts and images of the original OWS-New York City and OWS-London, which are juxtaposed with those of the authors and publishers of the radical press, namely the political texts of John Thelwall, the periodical journalism of William Cobbett and Richard Carlile, the satirical journalism of Thomas Wooler and the pamphlet satires by William Hone. The conclusion will interpret the meaning of the politico-cultural intervention of OWS in relation to the popular radical occupation of the public sphere. Do today's protesters have the same eloquence and the same daring?

## The Occupation of Physical and Intellectual Space

*I lost my job & found an occupation*

From 17 September 2011, a group of about 2,000 protesters occupied "a privately owned public space" called Zuccotti Park, near Wall Street in New York City, until 15 November, when the police evicted the occupants. Whatever the nature of its inception – spontaneous eruption or carefully planned action by committed activists[6] – OWS succeeded in grabbing the attention of the broader public, and it made worldwide headlines. The purposes and the grievances addressed in the *DO-NYC* found an echo with the public at large:

> As we gather together in solidarity to express a feeling of mass injustice, we must not lose sight of what brought us together. We write so that all people who feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world can know that we are your allies (Rendon et al., 2011).

6 The latter hypothesis seems to prevail. David Graeber (2011b), an American anthropologist and one of the core activists, gives an inside account of the original occupation process in "On Playing By The Rules – The Strange Success Of #OccupyWallStreet", http://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2011/10/david-graeber-on-playing-by-the-rules-%e2%80%93-the-strange-success-of-occupy-wall-street.html (accessed 06/06/2014).

Success was unexpected, even for core OWS activists. In one of the most complete accounts of the experience seen from the inside – the survey conducted by Ruth Milkman, Stephanie Luce and Penny Lewis (Milkman et al., 2012) – most of the core activists interviewed said that they had been sceptical about the success of the *Adbusters*'s call[7] for a "Tahrir Square moment" in New York's financial district. This call for a Tahrir Square moment seems to prove right Craig Calhoun's view of OWS as part of an international wave of mobilization rather than just a domestic movement (Calhoun, 2013).

This broad appeal of OWS is explained, on the one hand, by the comprehensive array of specific concerns it allowed: it was a "floating signifier that everybody saw different things in", Jonathan Smucker, 34, a community organizer, pointed out (Milkman et al., 2012: 22). The ingenious slogan "we are the 99 percent" and its manifesto united the people, hit by the current crisis of capitalism:

> We are the 99 percent. We are getting kicked out of our homes. We are forced to choose between groceries and rent. We are denied quality medical care. We are suffering from environmental pollution. We are working long hours for little pay and no rights, if we're working at all. We are getting nothing while the other 1 percent is getting everything. We are the 99 percent.[8]

On the other hand, making Wall Street the symbolic target of the movement lent it a national, even worldwide, dimension. It was a symbol that resonated with people, especially with highly qualified young adults who are now unemployed and impoverished. They are the "young people, bursting with energy, with plenty of time on their hands, every reason to be angry, and access to the entire history of radical thought". The sense of frustrated expectations makes them the "natural harbingers of revolutionary ferment" (Graeber, 2011b).

The ability of OWS to strike a chord with a large section of the public is also due to the movement's redirection of political focus from debt to the overwhelming power of the banking system and its beneficiaries. OWS denounced

7 *Adbusters* is a Vancouver-based countercultural, ad-free, bi-monthly magazine. The original *Adbusters*'s call for action is dated from July 2011 and is addressed to "you 90,000 redeemers, rebels and radicals out there". It is seen as a "fresh tactic", a fusion of the Arab Spring with the "acampadas" of Spain, to devise a demand that "awakens the imagination". It can be accessed at https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html (accessed 02/06/2014).

8 See http://occupywallst.org (accessed 06/06/2014).

this oligarchy: the 1 per cent, whose interests are set against the other 99 per cent of the population. This slogan united people and invited sympathy for the movement.

Figure 1. Occupy Wall Street-New York City.

The question posed is, therefore, of knowing whether these OWS core ideas point to an enduring influence on political discourse and action, (not only in the USA but around the world), and how these elements can be linked to past movements, namely English popular radicalism. Frances Piven (2012), distinguished Professor at the City University of New York, argues that OWS marked the beginning of a new cycle of protest in the USA, whereas David Plotke (2012), Professor of Politics at the New School for Social Research, characterizes OWS as a "flash movement", albeit a vivid and significant one. Craig Calhoun (2013) finds a type of middle ground and argues that although OWS was (he uses the past simple to speak about OWS) "more moment than movement", it may influence the course of social change, even if it does not survive as such.

Media attention to economic inequality and the system that furthers it certainly skyrocketed during OWS and remained in the news thereafter; on the other hand, it must be noted that OWS continued to spawn initiatives that survived the evictions in the USA and around the world; it created networks and events, and resurfaced in a variety of different contexts. One of them was the 1 May 2012 rally and march in New York City. Another one is "InterOc-

cupy.net" a network formed in the aftermath of the movement, which connects occupiers around the world online and through conference calls. The slogan "Get Informed! Get Connected! Get Active!" appeals to collective action for building a better world. More recently, it resurfaced in Hong Kong as "Occupy Central", a movement for more democratic representation in that region of China.

These networks and events may plant the seeds of further social and cultural change. They involve many people in the issues raised by OWS, people who are frustrated and eager for new ideas. "OWS is part of a "cultural transformation", not a space where people are just protesting", said Lisa Fithian, "a space where people are 'walking the long road of social and cultural change'" (Milkman et al., 2012: 39). OWS is a kind of genie that is out of the bottle, and the question is whether the political and economic mainstream will be able to put it back in.

At a theoretical level, this movement is also innovative. On the one hand, it has reintroduced the notion of class to the political agenda. The concept of the 99 per cent, the ordinary people, is set against the 1 per cent, the ruling class. The slogan "we are the 99%" was displayed on countless signs and posters, see Fig. 1, restoring the old concept of class struggle. In discursive terms, it is new language, a type of language that shifted the viewpoint, now targeting those at the top. There is also a critique of the "financialization" of capitalism which David Graeber (2011b) sees as a kind of shift back into something that could be described as feudalism, as direct juro-political extraction, that is, to "take other people's things by legal means". On the other hand, in the age of the internet, OWS emphasises the importance of the appropriation of physical space. Occupation is the symbolic assemblage of "the people" reclaiming public space to defy political and economic hegemony through the exercise of freedom of speech and communication. Occupation is thus rightly perceived as a threat by the political establishment because it upsets the usual symbolic control of those spaces by government and the forces of order (Calhoun, 2013).

The initial success of OWS is therefore strongly connected with the ability to expose grievances in the public space. Kalle Lasn , the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Adbusters* considered in an interview that the occupation of the physical space of Zuccotti Park was vital: "One of the reasons why this movement became so big is because we had the boldness and the guts to say we are going to the center of global capitalism, the heart of which is Wall Street and we're going to occupy it" (Lasn, 2013).

No matter the significance of the physical occupation of public space – it is important to have a physical forum to speak to society at large – occupation must be substantiated with the power of ideas. It must have "fuel". The reclamation of a physical space is effective only if it is complemented with the occupation of intellectual space, that is, the physical and the cultural dimensions of the occupation are intimately connected. Political struggle becomes essentially rhetorical – we "live in a world of others' words" (Bakhtin, 1986: 143). David Graeber also associates the success of OWS to the emphasis placed on knowledge by a core of people of mixed class backgrounds but with one strong aspect in common – a remarkably high level of education. Knowledge was viewed as the means to understanding the world:

> It's no coincidence that the epicenter of the Wall Street Occupation, and so many others, is an impromptu library: a library being not only a model of an alternative economy, where lending is from a communal pool, at 0% interest, and the currency being leant is knowledge, as the means to understanding. (Graeber, 2011b).

In this process, rhetoric is not only the tool of politicised struggle – a struggle over the control of meanings – it becomes power in itself. It constitutes a category (almost dramaturgical) through which the world is organized politically. The power to speak becomes part of the larger process of political and cultural appropriation. Words, images, music, and social media may contribute to bringing about social and cultural change, that is, rhetoric can help to fuel protest movements (Piven, 2012).

One of the novelties of the recent protest is precisely that the reclamation of the public space has merged with the digital technologies. Ann Mische and Philippa Pattison (2000) had already echoed the idea that nowadays political participation depends heavily on the existence of social networks, both as conduits of information and resources and as qualitative support for the social and cultural ties essential to community solidarity and/or collective action. In the case of OWS, the digital technologies have intensified these processes. 35% of respondents in the above-mentioned survey (Milkman et al., 2012: 7) said that their main source of information was the internet and 14% said they relied on the social media – Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

This needs, however, some explanation. It is necessary to separate the waters. Kalle Lasn (2013) has argued that digital communications kept the movement growing and that the role of the website "occupywallstreet.org" was

decisive, as well as all the websites that sprang up thereafter. However, while the possibilities afforded by the internet were vital, there is also the conviction that the internet alone will not change the world. Wolfgang Kraushaar (2013), German political scientist at the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, argues that social beings need to go out onto the street and do something with others. It was – and still is – vital to occupy the public space physically. The crux of the contemporary struggle against financial capitalism lies precisely in the fertile combination of physical and intellectual elements of occupation.

OWS illustrates this interconnectedness. The following excerpt of the statement of principles adopted by "Occupy Pittsburgh" in November 2011 (consistent with those adopted by "Occupy Wall Street" New York) emphasises the combination of physical and intellectual elements. The occupation of the physical space is seen as a precondition for the real political process envisaged – the practice of participatory, or deliberative, democracy:

> We are a nonviolent, decentralized movement working to create a just society. We are claiming a space for public dialogue and the practice of direct democracy for the purpose of generating and implementing solutions accessible to everyone. To this end, we are exercising our rights to assemble peacefully and to speak freely, thus demonstrating our commitment to the long work of transforming the structures that produce and sustain these injustices (Le Blanc, 2012).

OWS wants to build a fairer world. Its public are "all people who feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world" (*DO-NYC*). These forces have their epitomes in the oligarchy formed by the financial and the political systems. They were especially targeted not only by OWS in the USA, but also by its global offspring.[9] In "Occupy London", for example, the occupants displayed ironic signs reading "trust me I'm a banker" and "trust him he's a banker"; another one showed the face of Tony Blair, the former British Prime Minister, saying "Take me to The Hague", an allusion to the International Court of Justice, at The Hague, in the Netherlands.

The political methodology of OWS is to use cooperation, participation and democratic processes to assert the power of the 99 per cent. Rachel Schragis, a young New York City artist and activist was inspired by the *DO-NYC*. She created *All of Our Grievances are Connected*, a flow-chart visualization of the *DO-*

9 At its peak OWS included 95 cities in 82 countries around the world.

*NYC* she posted on Facebook, which highlights the idea of the inclusiveness and interconnectedness of concerns. About this image, Schragis wrote:

> This image is profoundly not a solution: to either the injustices we face or my own (infinitely smaller) creative concerns. It is a statement of the problem, and its material being does not reflect the world we want: to start, it is drawn with (toxic) sharpies and distributed through the (unsustainably powered) internet. And the reality it states, let us not forget, is pretty bleak. I dream about making spaces that inspire justice - not just collections of words that show what's wrong. And isn't this really what OWS is about, at its core? Believing that if we start by stating the problems correctly, a better world than we can currently envision is possible. Demanding that we dream up that world, and build that dream (Myerson 2011).

Figure 2. Rachel Schragis, *All of Our Grievances are Connected*, 2011.

This image spread quickly on the internet. The reason may lie in its ability to concisely identify the main anxieties: "too much $ in too few hands", "straight up corruption", "disregard for human dignity", "ecological irresponsibility", "consolidation of information without accountability", and "overconsolidation of power". These grievances are linked by the phrase at the centre "Let These Facts be Known", which emphasises the need for the free circulation of ideas to bring about change.

OWS challenges and refuses the privileging of economic interests over political and social ones. Democracy is paramount, and it is linked to the economy, hence the cry of "Democracy first!" The political process is brought to the fore. Old-fashioned top-down politics is rejected and emphasis is put on inventing new forms of democracy fired from below. Politics is inseparable from economic and social issues. The relinking of the political, the social and the economic is at the heart of OWS. It is the old "political economy" translated for the 21st century.

*The Lord giveth, and the LORDS taketh away.*
*Blessed be the way of the LORDS*

The boldness to imagine a better world links OWS to English popular radicalism. English radicals also wanted to change the world – 'the things as they are'. For that, they built an "oppositional infrastructure" (Haywood, 2005: 5) that combined a "market for spoken debate" (Thompson, 1991a: 843) and the writings of the radical press. Discourse[10] and its sites thus became the privileged territories of political confrontation. The spoken word was exercised in taverns, pubs, meetings and demonstrations, through debates, lectures, the reading and discussion of radical periodicals, even songs and toasts.

Although orality remains one of the defining features of radical culture, as David Worrall (1992) has shown, the arena where the radicals were most innovative was the radical press. Radicals used the press to challenge the aristocratic establishment and to publicise their political agenda of parliamentary reform near the new audience they had created in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars.

Popular radicalism was a decentralised and heterogeneous movement that believed that the transformation of society would have to be political in the first place. For that, information and education were fundamental instruments; hence the importance attached to the information and commentary about parliamentary acts and debates, arrests and libel trials, petitions and public meetings, carried out in the radical press. The extension of readership to a working-class audience thus achieved is one of the most enduring contri-

10 The term "discourse" is used in the Foucauldian sense of production of knowledge through language, in complex interplay with ideology and power. "Discourse" becomes "historical event", rather than just linguistic/logical production of meaning/argument.

butions of popular radicalism to the progress of society. The radical press was the main vehicle.

Kevin Gilmartin (1996: 30) characterizes the radical press as "stubbornly active and physical" intertwining a sense of communality with a mock-satirical attitude towards power, an attitude which Wood (1994) perceptively termed "delight in unrespectability". In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, satire increasingly became a political weapon, an instrument for the demystification of the language of the establishment. It construed counter-meanings that subverted power relationships, as in the quotation from the radical periodical *The Black Dwarf* in epigraph. Ridicule, irony and truculence were not "tenacious forms of resistance to power" (Thompson, 1991b: 342), as they had been throughout the eighteenth-century (when the cultural and political hegemony of the ruling class was not challenged), but essentially tools of political confrontation. This role of satire is proclaimed in William Hone's satire *The Right Divine of Kings to Govern Wrong*:[11]

> ARISE, O Satire! -- tune thy useful song,
> Silence grows criminal, when crimes grow strong;
> Of meaner vice, and villains, sing no more,
> But Monsters crown'd and Crime enrobed with Power!

The use of the press as the radicals' most important instrument of political intervention reveals a strategic shift towards what William Blake called "mental fight",[12] as opposed to "physical fight". Rhetoric, art and propaganda became the privileged vehicles on the road to change. Political and social change was now seen as the product of the use of intellectual means of political influence. In effect, one of the originalities of popular radicalism is that most radical leaders were also authors. They were satirists, journalists, small-time publishers and booksellers, most of them autodidacts of an artisan background, who put their intellectual skills at the service of change. In a period of crisis, radicals made journalism and satire into bold "act" instead of simply "text", and into a cultural, even counter-cultural, instrument with great popular appeal.

11 This 1821 satire is found in "The William Hone Bio Text, a biography, bibliography and etext archive" a thorough and well-researched website by Kyle Grimes, 2011. http://honearchive.org/etexts/right-divine/right-divine-home.html (accessed 02/06/2014).

12 This expression is taken from *Jerusalem*, a small poem in the preface to *Milton a Poem*, written and illustrated between 1804 and 1810.

William Cobbett was the pioneer of this new vision, exercising his vast influence over the working people through the *Political Register* (1802-34), the periodical he edited for more than thirty years. Accompanying him was Richard Carlile, who edited his periodical *Republican* (1819-26) from prison, and Thomas Wooler, whose sophisticated wit in his periodical the *Black Dwarf, A London Weekly Publication* (1817-24) makes his journal one of the most influential radical journals in post-1815 Britain. Wooler used the literary convention of the pseudo-Oriental correspondent as oblique criticism of the ministers whose high-handed measures against the supporters of parliamentary reform were seen as despotic; the ingenious allegorical meaning of William Hone's satire made him the most famous satirist of his time. These texts, together with a plethora of satirical prints, focused the political opposition on the King, Castlereagh the Foreign Affairs Secretary, Sidmouth the Home Office Secretary, Eldon the Lord Chancellor. They built the rationale of the radical intervention.

The most popular forms of the radical press – pamphlets, satirical prints, and periodicals – contributed to what today might be called the democratization of society. Cobbett was one of the best at translating the sense of marginalisation of radical discourse, but also the certainty of their "eloquence" and "knowledge":

> It was perceived that the spirit of reading was abroad. It was perceived that the people *would* read. (...) You called them *rabble*, and their speeches and resolutions you called *trash*; but you had sense enough to see that this *trash* was such as you were unable to come up to. You saw that political knowledge of the highest sort was possessed in abundance by those whom your insolent pride had placed in the "lower orders"; that the leaders in the cause of Reform had eloquence as well as knowledge at command; and that it was impossible any longer to keep the people in the dark (*Political Register*, 6 September 1817, vol. xxxii: 718-9).

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, popular radicalism rendered adverse economic, political, and social conditions into cultural energy and privileged a political struggle whose main weapons were words and images. This intertwining of politics and culture was the fertile ground that provided popular radicalism with its force and imagination. Theirs was a culture of breach, in the sense that it did not turn back to paternalist regulations and relations in search for legitimation for their action. They were asserting the notion of shared political and cultural identity. They were looking forward to the future.

## Planting the seeds of change

The foundation of the radicals' better world lay in the demand for comprehensive parliamentary reform. "I have never written for temporary purposes", Cobbett wrote in his *Political Register* (vol. xxxvii: 1562) to highlight the permanence and centrality of the demand. It was no ephemeral vindication. Radicals saw it as the basis for the exercise of the rights of citizenship and, therefore, a *sine qua non* condition for the progress of society. Cobbett had no doubts:

> While I know, with as much certainty as I know that this is Tuesday, that the wisdom of my principles and proposed measures, of fourteen years age, must be acknowledged, and that in *acts of Parliament too*, or, that this country must take its chance on the boisterous sea of revolution (*Political Register*, vol. xxxvii: 1563).

Images were powerful propaganda tools and they were used to comment on all the issues radicals discussed in the public sphere. Parliamentary reform was publicized in countless satirical prints. In the print below, James Gillray depicts John Thelwall (1764-1834) addressing a crowd in a meeting in 1795 at Copenhagen Fields, outside London. He is asserting the need for parliamentary reform: "I tell you, Citizens, we mean to new-dress the Constitution, and turn it, and set a new Nap upon it". He uses the distinctive confrontational style: "it is better to have your throats cut like the Pigs you have been compared to, than to be hanged like the Dogs to which you have not yet been assimilated".

Figure 3. James Gillray, Copenhagen House, 1795.
© Trustees of the British Museum

The struggle for parliamentary reform was fought side by side with another struggle – the struggle for the expansion of the public sphere. Through taxes, trials for sedition and blasphemy, or seizure of property, post-war repression aimed directly at stifling radical voices. Radicals responded with a persistent struggle for the freedom of the press. For that, many were tried and imprisoned. Richard Carlile was ten years in prison, in a war of resistance for the right of publication. The spirit of defiance with which he reacted to the attempts by the "Vice Society" to close his shop by indicting his wife was, in his case, not only rhetorical:

> I take this opportunity of repeating my thanks to the Vice Society, for the extensive circulation they are again giving my publications. I hear from London that the prosecution of Mrs Carlile produces just the same effect as my prosecution did – it quadruples the sale of all her publications (*Republican*, vol. iii: 116).

There's a sense of freedom and might in the above words, which pervades the whole radical public intervention. The capacity of radicals to put themselves on the line for their convictions and at the same time imaginatively "delight in unrespectability" (Wood, 1994) is part of the radical legacy. William Hone is another example. Hone was tried in 1817 on three successive days for having published three liturgical parodies and his trials occupy a special place in the struggle for the freedom of the press. Hone defended himself alone, without legal counsel, and was acquitted. This and other victories over the power of state reinforced the radicals' self-confidence and sharpened their discourse. His trials epitomize the confrontational attitude, the resilience and the intellectual capacity of radical authors and publishers. Hone read parts of his and others' parodies as part of his defence, to the delight of the audience who filled the courtroom. He used the liturgy as a metaphor to denounce a corrupt political system and, by inference, assert the need for its reformation:

> Our Lord who art in the Treasury, whatsoever be thy name, thy power be prolonged, thy will be done throughout the empire, as it is in each session. Give us our usual sops, and forgive our occasional absences on divisions, as we promise not to forgive them that divide against thee. Turn us not out of our places; but keep us in the House of Commons, the Land of Pensions and Plenty; and deliver us from the People. Amen (Hone, 1818: 9).[13]

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13 This is an excerpt, read in court, of one of the liturgical parodies, *The Late John Wilkes's Catechism of a Ministerial Member*.

Political corruption was another central theme of popular radicalism, publicized by Cobbett's catch phrase "Old Corruption". The people were portrayed as victims of the vice and self-interestedness of those holding political office. The most popular satirical devices – parody, symbols, nicknaming – were used to denounce despotism and its offspring – corruption. In the satire *The Right Divine of Kings to Govern Wrong*,[14] William Hone depicts politicians and rulers as armed ruffians:

When a gang of desperate ruffians disguise themselves, and take the road armed, it is a sure sign of robbery and murder; and it becomes the duty of an honest man to raise a *hue and cry*, and describe the villains.Thomas Wooler published several articles in *The Black Dwarf* entitled "A Peep at the Peers" containing a list of the names of the Peers together with the amount of public money they received:

> Somebody, my friend, has been peeping at the peers of this celebrated kingdom. (...) Though this is *only a peep*, it has a little disconcerted their Lordships. Lord Eldon, good soul, declares he never read so *much falsehood* in his life! What lucky fellow, for a lawyer and a Lord Chancellor! (*Black Dwarf*, 1820, vol. v: 313).

At the end, the "Black Dwarf" says: "This is as much as thou wilt be able to digest at once, unless thou hast a better stomach than my friend John Bull, who is rather sick of it". He signs, "Thy friend, The Black Dwarf" (vol. v: 318). This mock-satirical attitude and self-confident, joyful awareness of cultural and political identity is still inspiring today, almost two hundred years later. The same sense of hope and joy arises from the account by Marina Sitrin, postdoctoral fellow at the CUNY Graduate Center, of her experience at Zuccotti Park on the founding night:

> It was the night of September 17, and more than 2,000 people filled Zuccotti Park. As night fell, we began the General Assembly. It was intense, inspiring and went on for hours. A consensus was reached: we would occupy. Thousands of twinkling hands went up in silent applause, and then we began a chant—no, a song, really, a call and response. The facilitators asked, "What does democracy look like?" Thousands responded, "This is what democracy looks like!" We were singing, jumping up and down and dancing, full of joy and a sense of our own power. I smile now as I write these words, a smile filled

14 "The William Hone Bio Text", http://honearchive.org/etexts/right-divine/right-divine-home.html. (accessed 02/06/2014).

> with the same joy and power. It is not a reminiscent or retrospective joy but a very real and present joy of our mutually discovered power (Sitrin, 2012a).

Jonny Jones (2011) argues that that the [Occupy] movement is alive with a sense of internationalism and radicalism. Spyros Van Leemnen, one of the organizers of "Occupy London" told *Time* magazine that this movement is "global": "we're feeling for the first time that people have a common goal" (Gibson, 2011). The regular posts of the movement on Twitter take information considered of interest to the public that is not on the newspaper headlines to all corners of the world. For its internationalism, OWS can be considered the first global grassroots movement.

No matter its future, Ilyse Hogue (2012) sees the renovating influence of OWS on politics. She asks: "If Occupy died tomorrow, would it have left behind a fundamentally transformed landscape with new players, new methods and new values? The answer to that is an exciting and liberating yes". An occupant at Zuccotti Park stated: "even if we lost the encampments, the networks and the relationships that are built in the encampment are going to stay" (Milkman et al., 2012: 39).

The radicals shared the same conviction in the force of unrestricted intellectual exchange – the spoken and the written word, in an extended public sphere. Intellectual capacity and imagination were tools against the power of state. John Thelwall illustrates this vision. He wrote in his work *The Rights of Nature* (Thelwall 1796) that the diffusion of ideas promotes human liberty, as "each brings, as it were, into the common bank his mite of information, and putting it to a sort of circulating usance [*sic*], each contributor has the advantage of a large interest, without any diminution of capital". To this power of ideas he added the force of being united with other people:

> Man is, by his very nature, social and communicative – proud to display the little knowledge he possesses, and eager as opportunity presents, to increase its store. Whatever presses men together (...) is favourable to the diffusion of knowledge, and ultimately promotive of human liberty. (...) A sort of Socratic spirit will necessarily grow up, wherever large bodies of men assemble (Thelwall, 1796: 21, 24).

Adapting Thewall's metaphors to the present time, we see the same comprehensive critique of the working of today's democratic institutions in the discourse of OWS. OWS also aims to transform power relationships. The same defiant self-assertion of a generation is found there. The possibility of rethink-

ing everything, of asking what an economy is really for, inspired again a generation of people, downtrodden by financial capitalism. For David Graeber (2011a), the greatest job of the occupiers is "to break the 30-year stranglehold that has been placed on the human imagination". It is to choose hope and joy, instead of despair and anger. For Frances Piven (2012), American politics has not seen a protest movement with this much imagination, energy and traction for a long time.

Popular radicalism was more than just a political movement for parliamentary reform; it was fundamentally a culture, characterized in its various dimensions by Edward P. Thompson, in his 1963 work *The Making of the English Working Class*. Its identity was strongly communal, the political attitude confrontational and the style concrete, direct, based on the "us" against "them" – and boldly satirical.

## Conclusion

*O PRINTING! How hast thou disturbed the peace!*
William Hone, *The Political Showman – at Home*

It has been shown that the politico-cultural intervention of OWS is part of a long tradition of resistance to oppression and injustice and of assertion of forward-looking political principles. This tradition essentially incorporates the political and cultural demands of early nineteenth-century English popular radicalism. The OWS and the 1790s political radicals are broadly united by a common goal: to defy political and economic hegemony through the exercise of active citizenship. OWS wanted a more democratic economy and polity, hence their cry "Democracy First!" Popular radicalism wanted the extension of franchise to the working classes and a fairer distribution of wealth. Both had human dignity in mind.

For that, OWS targeted "the corporate forces of the world" (*DO-NYC*). This broad signifier has united people. Popular radicalism focussed on the political system. It persistently denounced "Old Corruption" and aristocratic privilege, epitomized in an almost exclusive political representation. Both stressed the need for accountability and transparency in public life. This view of politics is liberating, hence the frequent reference to imagination in any critical account of these movements.

At a more discrete level, we also find that both movements signal new forms of political and social expression. OWS has shifted the political focus by bringing the discussion of inequality back to the centre of the political debate. Additionally, it has triggered interesting intellectual exchange, not only in the academia, but also in blogs, websites (namely http://occupywallst.org) social networks, newspaper articles and, of course, posters, signs and other print and media forms. These forms of political expression, summed up in the imperatives “Get Informed!” “Get Connected!” “Get Active!” draw attention to the importance of the free exchange of ideas for collective action.

Popular radicalism created a new political language and, along with it, a new political audience. Radicals took the written word to high levels of civic and political intervention. Through the radical press they produced a cultural revolution for thousands of people of the working classes. They also showed that the progress of society implies active citizenship. Radical authors, journalists and activists made an important contribution to the building of a more democratic society based on the rule of law and on individual liberties *vis-a-vis* privilege. Their emblem was parliamentary reform, and their agents were the struggle for the freedom of the press and the belief in public opinion as a force against arbitrary power – a political struggle with deep cultural undertones.

This struggle echoes in the global demands for transparency and democracy, almost two hundred years later. Financial capitalism and its oligarchy are the targets today. Whatever its future, OWS has shifted the terms of the political debate and signalled new forms of political expression that may influence the course of social and cultural change. Most importantly, the principles and praxis of this movement highlight the importance of looking for continuity of traditions in the study of cultural and social change. Conflict and trauma may not be inevitable, but the fact is that they are often a component of social and cultural change.

## Abbreviations

*Declaration of the Occupation of New York City – DO-NYC*
Occupy Wall Street – OWS
Occupy Wall Street New York City – OWS-NYC

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