

Samuel Burgum, *Occupying London: Post-Crash Resistance and the Limits of Possibility*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. ISBN: 9780367438968 (paper); ISBN: 9781138291539 (cloth); ISBN: 9781315265254 (ebook)

Dedicated to David Graeber.

From the biggest anti-war protest against the Iraq War in 2003, to the Arab Uprisings in 2011 (see Al-Ali 2012; Winegar 2012), to a decade of resistance against austerity in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash (see Craddock 2017, 2019) embodied in the Occupy Movement, there should be no doubt that the 21st century has been overwhelmingly characterised by civil resistance to capitalism and neoliberalism. Yet, as we enter another phase of global uncertainty in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, overwhelming pessimism surrounding the inevitability of capitalist hegemony or neoliberal “common sense” permeates popular, political and scholarly analysis (see Brown 2015). Work looking back at more than a decade of resistance against neoliberal individuation may offer us some reprieve from pessimism and allow us to reconsider the possibilities for re-invigorating social justice struggles in the present moment.

Sam Burgum’s *Occupying London* is one such text. Based on three years of ethnographic fieldwork across multiple activist sites in London, the book traces the emergence and evolution of Occupy (in) London between 2012 and 2014. Detailed interview data immersed in critical poststructuralist theory which draws on the work of Rancière, Foucault and Žižek, among others, illuminates a movement that gave voice to a generation of activists who abandoned the notion of traditional class politics in favour of the inclusive label of the 99%. Although much has been written on the subject of Occupy, both in terms of praise and critique (see Barker 2012; Bassett 2014; Langman 2013; Maharawal 2013), Burgum offers a theoretical contribution which remains relevant in the present moment. *Occupying London* refuses easy romanticism or cynicism; Burgum theorises the narratives of his activist interlocutors in a manner that stays faithful to his philosophy that they are

theorists in their own right. The book simultaneously offers a theoretical account which is useful to students and theorists of social movements in general and may in fact be indispensable for activists who remain committed to the agenda for social change which emerged with Occupy.

Burgum's account in *Occupying London* speaks to to the complexity of its subject. It challenges popular dismissals of notions of horizontal, decentralised organising as the purview of utopian "nonsense". The occupiers, both seasoned activists and those who are newly inspired to action by a movement which proclaimed the 99%, are rendered as a collective which has a vision for change if not a concrete programme for ending neoliberal hegemony. Yet, despite its promise to bring together the discontented majority, Occupy (in) London is now infamous for its demise as a consequence of internal struggles over resources, unchecked power imbalances, and internal hierarchies based on gender, race and class.

In Chapter 4, Burgum sensitively describes a movement in desperate search of authenticity and the creation of an alternative activist identity and lifestyle politics which are as free as possible from capitalist exploitation and consumerist desires. The unfortunate consequence is that while activists are conscious of their own contradictions there is a tendency to dismiss others as inauthentic or merely performing authenticity, which results in problematic and exclusionary ethical and aesthetic judgements. The role played by aesthetic politics is explored in the final chapter where Burgum describes role markers of (un)belonging play in the proliferation of conspiracy theories which rupture trust and cooperation within the movement. From speculations about the meaning of who wears black boots, to who brings a new tent into the encampment, or who has gained weight when resources are lacking, Burgum highlights that activists' analysis of power often ignores much more straightforward structural explanations of class and access to resources in favour of conspiracies about others as indicators of the "secretive" and "underhand" interventions of agents of the state in the service of corporate interests. As one activist recounts, almost everyone at some point is rumoured or suspected to be under-cover police, either gathering intelligence on the camp and/or trying to undermine actions. Such othering inevitably results

in distrust and divisiveness among activists and in extreme cases results in ostracism and people leaving the moment.

Despite the movement's shortcomings, Burgum's critical reflection remains relevant in the present moment and provides an insight into Occupy's productive legacy. In many respects, Occupy *set an agenda* even if it did not produce a programme for change. For example, homelessness has remained an integral component of London's squatting movement which is the subject of Burgum's latest research (see <https://squattinglondon.wordpress.com/about/>). And the question of leadership and whether social change is possible only if a movement engages with the official political process is something discussed at length by the activists towards the end of the book. In many respects, between 2011 and 2019 Occupy re-politicised a generation of young people who had been dismissed as disinterested in politics, giving rise to the resurgence of left-wing movement-inspired party politics in the Middle East, North Africa, the UK, the US, and Europe. Right-wing populist resistance and in some cases the parliamentary defeat of these parties should not be cause for despair. The social movement politics which made the election of these parties a possibility have not disappeared.

The Black Lives Matter movement in the US and its constituent movements across Europe and elsewhere have in many respects picked up the mantle and tactics of Occupy. BLM is rooted in anti-capitalist, anti-carceral, and feminist modes of critique and activism (see Chatelain and Asoka 2015; Ransby 2015) which has since the summer of 2020 galvanised transnational solidarity and resistance against racial capitalism and racialised brutality. Most importantly, while the movement remains committed to grassroots and diffuse organising, it is also unafraid to speak truth to and demand accountability from power. Power being understood as structural as well as systemic injustice which is rooted in institutional governance, and everyday racist discourses and practices of policing, social segregation, and the racialised and classed deprivation of black communities in the USA, whose struggle is now increasingly recognised as linked to broader injustices of international racial capitalism (see Taylor 2016). Burgum's appraisal and critique of Occupy as a movement which needed

to evolve in order to sustain momentum should be seen as indispensable to Occupy's successors. Particularly, his insistence on resisting conspiracy theories which sow distrust among activists, as well as resisting aesthetic politics which fail to take into account different activists' entry points into social movement activism. Taking on board a critique from the place of solidarity can only strengthen a movement in its quest to resist the ravages of neoliberal dispossession. The book's message is even more pertinent in the present moment as we face a second financial crash in just over a decade. Party politics may have failed to manifest change but mobilizing alternative political strategies for change has always been the mainstay of social movements.

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