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Representing Consensus and Dissent: On the (Anti-)Representational Politics of the Occupy Movement

Gerald Posselt

1. Introduction

According to a widespread reading, as for example proposed by Chantal Mouffe or Jacques Rancière, contemporary political theory could be divided into two major camps: consensual approaches to politics on the one side and dissensual approaches on the other. While the former assume that «partisan conflicts are a thing of the past and consensus can now be obtained through dialogue» and deliberation, the latter argue that «the antagonistic dimension [is] constitutive of 'the political'»[1] - a dimension that has to be acknowledged, if we want to find political answers to the 'post-democratic' stage of contemporary societies that goes along with new forms of violence and hatred.[2] Moreover, both positions are essentially engaged with the pressing problem of representation with which political theory and liberal democracies have been concerned for many years: While consensual approaches have to deal with the question of how to account for those who are excluded from the hegemonic regimes of representation as well as for those who are not able or not willing to take part in the process of consensus building, dissensual approaches are confronted with the problem of how to transform dissensual manifestations of politics into sustainable political institutions without negating dissent and antagonism at the heart of society.

I want to address these questions by challenging and analyzing the (anti-)representational politics of the Occupy movement. Therefore, I will especially focus on the main slogan 'We are the 99 percent' as well as the communicative strategies employed by the so-called General Assemblies, leaving other aspects and facets of the protests aside for the sake of brevity. I will demonstrate that these strategies can neither be

1. Mouffe 2005, 1-2.
2. Cf. Rancière 2000.

reduced to a simple anti-representational politics, nor can they be easily conceptualized in the context of the dissensus-consensus-opposition; rather, they force us to think this distinction anew, especially regarding the question of what other forms of representation can be developed and imagined beyond the dangerous pitfalls of a naïve notion of representation on the one side and an anti-representational stance on the other.

I will proceed in four steps: first I will outline the critique and crisis of representation in the interplay of linguistic and political representation. I will then discuss the anti-representational and consensual politics of the Occupy movement and point out some of its dangers and shortcomings. Thirdly, I will demonstrate how the seemingly anti-representational and consensual strategies of the Occupy movement are thwarted by its own practices of speaking, and, finally, I will connect these findings to my initial questions on the crisis of representation and the opposition between consensual and dissensual approaches to politics.

2. The Crisis of Representation

According to Michel Foucault's analysis in *The Order of Things*, the 'Classical age' experienced a shifting of *epistemes* around 1800 that led to the end of the then predominant model of representation: consequently, language «is no longer a system of representations which has the power to pattern and recompose other representations»;[3] rather it «acquires a being proper to itself» and becomes object of knowledge among others.[4] That is, language is no longer considered a disposable instrument for the expression and formulation of our thoughts but a power in its own right that structures and organizes our concepts and ideas.[5] Thus, *representation* gradually loses its status as a reliable and universal epistemological model. Starting from Friedrich Nietzsche, structuralist and poststructuralist approaches, among others, underscore the essentially unstable and sliding relation between signifier and signified. At the same time, the subject forfeits its priv-

3. Foucault 1970, 315.
4. Cf. Foucault 1970, 322.
5. Cf. Posselt 2009.

ileged position and ceases to be the sole origin and the sovereign master of its utterances. Thus, the capacity of language adequately to express and represent the ideas, experiences and intentions of the speakers is being increasingly called into question. Representation is no longer considered the presentation (*Darstellung*), idea (*Vorstellung*) or re-presentation (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of something absent from immediate perception, but rather it is seen as pointing to the complex mechanisms and processes of the construction of reality.[6]

So it is all the more astonishing that the political systems of representation that originated in the civil revolutions in England, France and North America were established at a time when the status of representation as a reliable and universal form of knowledge was already being questioned within philosophy. In politics, however, representation was not generally regarded as something problematic, questionable or precarious, but rather as the essential remedy against the formation of factions, the division of society and the repression of minorities, as James Madison argues in the *Federalist Papers*. Far from undermining the political processes of deliberation, consensus-building and decision-making, representation was considered «to refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens».[7]

In contrast, today it seems a common assumption that the representational systems of liberal democracies are deeply troubled. However, it was not before the turn of the millennium - especially in the wake of the processes and developments of globalization - that the crisis of political representation, mainly understood as a crisis of the legitimacy of political institutions, became manifest. Regarding the nation-state, this crisis is reflected in a widespread disenchantment with politics, lack of interest in social questions, low voter turnout, unwillingness of citizens to get involved with traditional political parties on the one side, as well as loss of power by political actors, who see themselves confronted with economic constraints and dictates by global companies and rating agencies, on the other side. Seen from this perspective, politics appears no longer as a socio-political process of opinion and

6. Cf. Hacking 1983; Latour 1999; Hall 1997b; Waldenfels 2007.
7. Hamilton, Madison, et al. 2008, 53.

decision-making that includes the participation of the citizens and their elected representatives, but becomes a mere administrative proceeding conducted and directed by professional politicians and experts. Colin Crouch speaks in this context of post-democracy, by which he understands a society in which,

> while elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams.[8]

On an international level, the crisis of representation is heightened in the wake of increasing globalization. With respect to trans- and supranational organizations and institutions, whether political, economic or military, as for example the European Union (EU), Nato, G7, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Trade Organization (WTO), fundamental democratic principles are deeply challenged: the congruency between representatives and represented on the one +hand, and the unequivocal «assignability of decisions to responsible and accountable subjects» on the other.[9]

3. The Refusal of Representation

In this context, the political protests of the last years - from the Arab Spring across the Idignados of the Puerta del Sol and the worldwide Occupy movement to the occupation of Gezi Parc and Syntagma Square - revealed that large sections of the population do no longer feel adequately represented - neither by the authoritarian leaders of the Arab world nor by the economic and political elites of Western liberal democracies. At the same time, these movements brought to mind how difficult it is to maintain political protests over a long period of time and to transform the experiences gained from the protests into sustainable and effective institutions that can rely on a broad and stable consensus of civil society. What we currently are witnessing is an unforeseen return to the former status quo, or worse. With few exceptions, the ideals of the Occupy movement have evaporated without any tangible

8. Crouch 2004, 4.
9. Leggewie 2002, 91.

effect. Instead of the utopia of an egalitarian and open society, the Arab world is experiencing uncontrolled civil war, while Western societies, not least the EU, are confronted with the rise of right wing populism, ethnic tension and xenophobia.

Although these movements and protests are highly diverse regarding their socio-political contexts and their specific motivations, at least those occurring in the Western liberal democracies seem to have one thing in common: they all seem to share a critical approach towards representation. Well known slogans like 'You don't represent us!' or 'We are the 99 percent!' articulate the widespread discontent with existing forms of governance and political decision-making at national and international levels. This critique is not only directed at existing forms of representational regimes, combined with the demand for adequate representation and participation of those who are excluded from the realm of the visible and the audible, rather it is directed against the principle of representation as such. This is based on the notion that any representation is finally inadequate, unable appropriately to represent those for whom it stands or speaks, as well as that there is no representation without exclusions and power relations.

This negative stance becomes especially manifest - at least at first sight - in the apparent rejection of any representational politics in the *General Assemblies* of the Occupy movement. Processes of decision-making are, as it seems, strictly horizontal and consensus-oriented. Everybody has the same right to participate and to speak out without prior authorization, solely mediated by facilitators who organize the list of speakers. The only requirement is that everyone speaks for him- or herself in the first person singular, whereas the use of the We-form is dismissed. Discussions proceed until a provisional consensus is reached or the assembly is declared closed by all participants. In short, while any kind of representation, delegation and speaking-for is refused, egalitarian forms of speech and argumentation oriented towards understanding are unanimously favored.

Especially remarkable is the fact that no microphones and sound systems are used in the assemblies (after the New York City Council prohibited their use in Zuccotti Park). Instead, the voice of the speaker is amplified and multiplied by the *human microphone* of the assembly - a practice quickly adopted by different protest movements around the world. Accordingly, each sentence of the respective speaker is repeated

and echoed by the whole group, while the participants of the assembly accompany the speech with bodily gestures to express and articulate consent, dissent, their wish to speak, etc. The refusal of the We-form goes along with the refusal of elected or self-proclaimed spokespersons as well as with a strict opposition to the appropriation of the protests by established political parties, unions or NGOs including their symbols, logos or posters.

However, the price to be paid for the denial of representation seems high. The consequences are significant loss of political agency as well as lack of clear political demands and visions. Without spokespersons or explicit political agendas, political upheavals run the risk to ebb away ineffectively and to remain without impact and sustainable consequences for civil society. Moreover, the notion of consensus implicitly presupposed in the proceedings of the assemblies remains quite vague and problematic. For it is not clear how we have to understand this consensus, what its range is and what the criteria for a supposedly reached consensus might be.

Moreover, there is a certain risk in constructing Occupy as a post- or anti-representational movement, as Jodi Dean and Jason Jones argue: on the one hand, the claim that the individual can only speak on its own behalf would precisely reproduce the very neoliberal rhetoric of autonomy, self-responsibility and free choice it opposes; on the other hand, «the fantasy at work in the insistence on the unrepresentability of Occupy is a fantasy of multiplicity without antagonism, of difference without division».[10]

Such a position not only tends to imagine a community without conflict and dissent, it also jeopardizes political agency and the possibility of social transformation. Indeed, according to Derrida, the anti-representational prejudice gives rise to a significant risk, since it expresses the desire for an unmediated presence without deferral and difference. Any criticism of representation «would remain feeble, vain, and irrelevant», according to Derrida, «if it were to lead to some rehabilitation of immediacy, of original simplicity, of presence without repetition or delegation».[11]

10. Dean and Jones 2012.
11. Derrida 1982, 311.

4. 'We are the 99 percent': Revisiting Occupy's Anti-Representational Politics

Against this background I would like to propose another reading of the Occupy movement. For it can be argued that the movement has a certain quality that might compensate for the lack of political agency stemming from its anti-representational and consensus-oriented politics. Broadly speaking, the main focus of the movement is not so much its content (and its possible outcome), but rather the form it takes, i.e. the ways in which it is enacted and put forward on the streets and squares; not so much what is spoken about, but how it is spoken about; not so much the formulation of aims and objectives, but rather the creation of a space of appearance and a sphere of experience in order to probe and stage new ways of acting and speaking. In short, what is at stake is not so much the promotion of distinct objectives and propositions, but the performative re-appropriation and recapturing of the public sphere as a space of appearance, in which crucial social questions are no longer excluded from political consideration, but can be articulated and discussed for the very first time.[12] Moreover, the occupiers do not only seize the word and raise their voices; they also bring into play the human body in its precarity, indigence and vulnerability and make it a rallying point of political contestation. In other words, against the representational politics of sovereign subjects, the Occupy movement brings into play a performative politics of the body. Thus, Occupy does not only propose an alternative to a rhetoric of economic constraints and pragmatic reasoning, but rather performs and enacts it on the streets and squares. While the «economic constraint determines what is being voted upon, even what is allowed to be talked about», as exemplified by the negotiations over the EU rescue package for Greece, «the assemblies of the Occupy movement practice the counter-model», as Jan Ole Arps puts it perhaps too optimistically:

> They focus on equal communication and understanding, everything else is secondary. That is neither practical nor pragmatic, sometimes it takes time. But these assemblies organize participation and commonality. That is their very strength.[13]

12. Cf. Teune 2011.
13. Arps 2011 (my translation).

However, this does not necessarily mean that the Occupy movement endorses a notion of rational consensus or of an ideal speech situation, or that the aim of the movement can be reduced to a merely anti-representational position, as some commentators emphasize. On the contrary, precisely by capturing and restructuring the sphere of appearance as a realm of acting and speaking otherwise, Occupy refuses the given procedures of consensus-building and points to the fundamental dissensus over the contested question of what speaking means. Or as Rancière writes:

> This is what dissensus means. Political dissensus is not a discussion between speaking people who would confront their interests and values. It is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice.[14]

Moreover, while «consensus consists [...] in the reduction of politics to police»,[15] i.e. «the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution»,[16] dissensus is the «essence of politics»[17] that transforms and re-figures the public space «into a space for the appearance of the subject».[18]

This dissensus is also articulated by the main slogan of the Occupy movement 'We are the 99 percent'. Instead of evoking and representing an alleged collective identity (comparable to the slogan 'We are the people' during the protests in the former GDR), it enacts the fundamental split and antagonism between the 1 percent that own the majority of global wealth and the 99 percent that can only call a marginal fraction of worldwide assets their own. Although this antagonism - understood as the exclusionary limit that grounds all social systems according to Ernesto Laclau and Oliver Marchart - cannot be directly represented, it can *show* itself «in form of the interruption or breakdown of the

14. Rancière 2011, 2.
15. Rancière 2010b, 42.
16. Rancière 1999, 28.
17. Rancière 2010b, 38.
18. Rancière 2010b, 37.

very process of signification»[19] or as a politically salient performative contradiction.[20] Accordingly, it is crucial that the Occupy movement not only states the antagonistic split that constitutes society, but precisely performs and politicizes it by the slogan 'We are the 99 percent.' With the same gesture it politicizes those practices and activities that are usually allocated to the private sphere, such as sleeping, drinking, eating, using the bathroom, etc., thereby questioning the fundamental distinction between the private and the public sphere that is, in fact, already constitutive of the political.[21]

This split becomes manifest not only with regard to society, but also with regard to speech and language. Indeed, if taken literally, the claim that everyone can only speak on one's own behalf, ignores and neglects the fundamental split by which the speaking subject is constituted in the first place. This becomes especially manifest in the productive performative contradiction that the joint practice of the *human microphone* both performs and names (between the 'I' and the 'We', the speaker and the audience, the individual and society), when the 'I' of the speaker is echoed and amplified by the multitude of the crowd. What becomes apparent here - besides the split between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the statement - are not only the bodily and material conditions of speech that constitute every speech act as a bodily act, but also the fact that my speech is only my speech, insofar as it is always already the speech of everybody else. In short, I can only say 'I', insofar as this 'I' is at the same time the 'I' of all the others, insofar as this 'I' cites and reiterates all 'I's uttered before. Thus, the echo of the multitude exposes, as it were, the split of the subject. Or to put it in Lacanian terms: «language comes from the Other, and the idea that 'I' am master of my discourse is only an illusion».[22] This entanglement of the 'We' and the 'I' is also reflected and illustrated by the posters on which individuals tell their personal

19. Marchart 2004.

20. Cf. Posselt 2016.

21. Cf. Rancière 2011, 4; Butler 2012.

22. Evans 1996, 55. These considerations have also far-reaching consequences for the concept of consensus. For if the subject is already split and dispossessed by the speech of the other and thus never fully in control of its intentions, then also the possibility of distinguishing rational consensus from a forced, delusive consensus ultimately becomes impossible (cf. Böhler and Rähme 1998, 1292).

stories by using the slogan 'I am the 99 percent'. In this way the 'We are the 99 percent' is fractured by the 'I am the 99 percent' that does not claim to speak for 99% of the people, but rather *presents* a particularity that necessarily lays claim to a universality.[23]

5. Concluding Remarks

Two conclusions can be drawn from this. Firstly, political identities cannot be solely construed according to the we/they distinction,[24] but always also involve the relation between a 'we' and a 'I'. Secondly, the definition of language as representation and thus of representability as such «is not the effect of an accidental prejudice [...] of which we could rid ourselves by a decision»[25] but rather is constitutive of language itself, for without representability it would not even be possible to say 'I.' What comes into play here is not only the entanglement of linguistic and political representation,[26] but also the impossibility of escaping representation in the end. There is neither an exteriority nor a beyond to representation as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri imagine, although one has to agree with them that there is no way back to the established models of representation.[27] Rather, we have to avoid the unproductive dilemma that seems to provide only two alternatives: either the return to a naïve, pre-critical concept of representation with the well-known remedies such as more direct democracy and referenda; or the complete rejection of the concept of representation that runs the risk of relapsing into all too familiar forms of identity politics.

Equally, there seems to be no clear answer to the question whether Occupy is a movement that aims at eliminating conflict, dissent and antagonism by envisaging a «democratic politics in terms of consensus and reconciliation» - believing «in the possibility of a universal rational consensus» and in a society of dialogue and deliberation[28] - or whether it is a movement that follows a dissensual friend/enemy

23. Cf.http://wearethe99percent.-tumblr.com/post/64064302796/how-can-you-claim-to-speak-for-99-of-people.

24. Mouffe 2005, 4.

25. Derrida 1982, 304.

26. Cf. Butler 2012.

27. Cf. Hardt and Negri 2004, 255, 295.

28. Mouffe 2005, 3.

politics that brings to the fore antagonism at the heart of society. Obviously, the Occupy movement evades this simple distinction. For it certainly «deals with the formation of a 'we' as opposed to a 'they' and is [...] concerned with collective forms of identification» and consequently «has to do with conflict and antagonism»;[29] but since its goal is not decision but free discussion, it clearly belongs to the realm of dialogue, deliberation and consensus-building. Accordingly, it implies elements of both dissensual and consensual politics, and it could easily be argued that it is precisely this indecisiveness - articulating an antagonism without decision - that is responsible for its political ineffectiveness. However, taking into account its transformation of the we/they relation into a plurality of voices,[30] as outlined above, it could be equally asserted that Occupy precisely points the way for envisaging new forms of representation and consensus-building that consider dissensus a necessary and essential moment of democracy.[31]

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29. Mouffe 2005, 11.

30. Mouffe 2005, 23.

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