

## Occupy, Recuperate and Decolonize

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper examines the pedagogical implications of the Occupy Movement from a Latin American decolonial theoretical perspective. Central to this analysis is a geopolitical understanding of the ways in which capital and coloniality are historically “entangled.” Building upon the notion of a “neoliberal revolution” advanced by various Marxist scholars, the author argues for integrating an analysis of coloniality within the evolving forms that capital assumes in the global totality. In this essay, educational theory and practice is situated within the interrelated paradigms of Marxist and decolonial praxis.*

**Key words:** Occupation, decolonial thought, neoliberalism, education.

"Everything that surrounds us is false and unreal/ Todo lo que nos rodea es falso e irreal. The history that has been taught to us is false/ Es falsa la historia que nos enseñaron. False are the economic beliefs that have been imbued in our minds/ Falsas las creencias económicas que nos imbuyeron... Everything material, everything that can be sold, the transmissible or reproductive, is foreign or is submitted to the hegemony of external capital/ Todo lo material, todo lo venal, transmisible o reproductivo, es extranjero o está sometido a la hegemonía financiera extranjera."

--Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz, 1940

### **Introduction**

Occupy Wall Street, the most recent social movement to challenge corporate authority over the public sphere, has unleashed a torrent of social discontent. What began as a small assembly in Zuccotti Park, New York City, has spread to 951 cities in 82 countries (The Guardian, 2011). It is difficult, however, to pinpoint the starting ‘moment’ that led to a movement that has extended into a global phenomenon. The branding of the Occupy movement may have begun after Kalle Lasn, editor of the magazine *Adbusters*, coined #OCCUPYWALLSTREET as part of a hash tag on Twitter in the months preceding the physical act of occupation in New York (Yardley, 2012), but this too was part of a broader “cultural message” and a change in the “mental environment” (Yardley, 2012) of a global public increasingly disenchanted with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies that had chronically eroded public wages and welfare in debt-ridden and currency-strapped countries such as Greece and Spain. Further, if we pull the lens a bit further back in time, economic and military crises have spurred various ‘occupation’ movements among Latin American countries over the last decade. Ironically, the occupation movements in countries often considered at the core of the capitalist social order have their precedent in those deemed at the periphery, occasioning us to reconsider the binary between core-periphery altogether as we make sense of the unifying force of neoliberal capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The occupations of 2011– from St. Paul’s Cathedral in Central London to Syntagma Square in Athens, Greece – signal a rightful public dissatisfaction with the ways in which the corporate state and its attendant military and authoritarian apparatuses has usurped public well-being for private profit. We are living through global capitalism at its highest stage, a time when even scientists have applied their ‘objective science-beyond dogma’ to this global phenomenon and declared that a “super-entity” of “147 tightly knit companies” control “40% of the total wealth in the network” (New Scientist, 2011). The ‘network’ is based on an analysis of 43,000 transnational corporations, from which a small group (the ‘super-entity’), mainly banks, have a disproportionate power over the global economy. This power, of course, stems from the production of capital itself, an extended discussion that is not intended for the purposes of this essay.

Occupation has proven a timely and necessary response to the State, vexing the space for social discontent to be voiced and heard. But to witness and participate in occupation also leaves a hallowing echo, tapping into our minds the nagging question, what follows the act of protest? This question is not meant to diminish either the importance or the latent revolutionary potential of Occupation Movements. Nor is it intended to undermine the real-life sacrifices that protesters across the globe have made for the movement, in many cases leading to critical injury and death. Occupation as public protest raises new questions about what Henry Giroux calls the “emerging form of authoritarianism in the United States” evidenced through “an aggressive assault on social provisions that millions of Americans (*sic*) depend on” (2011). When we extend this analysis to a global scale, the difference lies in matter of understanding the relational forces at play in debilitating national economies and the social provisions that millions across continents have come to depend upon for their livelihood. This, in fact, draws our attention more precisely to what Stuart Hall (2011) has recently characterized as the “neoliberal revolution.” Taking a socio-cultural approach to addressing capital’s changing nature, Hall analyses the neoliberal revolution in terms of specific breaking points, significant historical moments that generated the conditions for neoliberal social policy to spread and infect our earthly fabric in ways more destructive than any apocalyptic blockbuster film causes us to shutter. In the classical Marxist analysis of Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy (2002), the breaking point for neoliberalism followed the wake of the structural economic crisis of the 1970s, a time when lower rates of accumulation, high unemployment and inflation, led to a “new configuration, *domestic* as well as international, in which the interests and power of capitalist ownership have been restored” (2002, p. 2). In either case, the *Contagion* of neoliberal acts has its roots intractably clenched on a set of ideas in ‘liberal’ political theory and the social relations of exploitation that accompanied the expansion of markets dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Hall, 2011). In Marx’s terms, it began with the accumulation of capital, a point that Hall describes thusly:

Marx once described this moment in the accumulation circuits of capital as ‘the very Eden of the innate rights of man’, the sources of the lexicon of bourgeois ideas – freedom, equality, property and ‘Bentham’

(i.e. possessive individualism and self-interest) p. 13

Neoliberalism, according to Hall, “evolves.” This echoes David Harvey’s perspective that capital, as Marx insisted, is “a process of circulation, not a thing” (2011, p. 6). The production of capital is constantly in circulation in order to make more capital. Capital, as a process, is always in movement, seeking to transcend obstacles in its path (Harvey, 2011) and as an imperialist project, to penetrate virgin markets for exploitation (Naomi Klein explores this point with particular depth in *Shock Doctrine*). The regulatory state – pre-1970s – was one of those obstacles that neoliberalism was able to overcome. We can trace neoliberalism’s formation to the development of capitalist society, that central contradiction between labour and capital of which revolutionary Marxist theorists presciently remind us (Kelsh and Hill, 2006), and to capitalist society’s attachment to liberal principles associated with so-named free society.

The ideas of the neoliberal revolution – predicated on an ethos of individualism and the ‘democratic’ forms presumed to accompany the free market – have imbued our social institutions and our everyday practices to the point of reducing the very notion of ‘public’ into an archaic afterthought. From the ashes of the neoliberal revolution has emerged a capitalist, transnational behemoth, that metastasizes via the state apparatus but that cannot be understood on statist terms alone. As Harvey (2011) notes, it is accompanied by a complex system of technological and organization forms of production, exchange and consumption, labour processes, institutional arrangements, and importantly, mental conceptions of the world, social relationships between people, and a relationship to nature. These elements are perpetually and dialectically entangled. They have been in motion since capital’s inception and they will need to be simultaneously addressed (and not just locally but transnationally) if we are to envision other forms of sociability.

The Occupation Movement has emerged as a response, perhaps one of those moments when people’s inability to meet their basic material needs in capitalist society spawns revolutionary social change. That was Marx’s vision -- a vision that remains increasingly true today. As Eagleton notes, the fact that capitalism’s underlying logic remains pretty constant is one reason why the Marxist critique of it is so limply valid. He writes: "Only if the system were genuinely able to break beyond its own bounds, inaugurating something unimaginably new, would this cease to be the case. But capitalism is incapable of inventing a future which does not ritually reproduce its present" (2011, p. 10).

The (reported) unemployment rate in the U.S. hovers at 9%; in Spain it is over 21% and among youth, an astonishing 45%. Globally, 203.3 million or 6.1 % of the world’s population is out of work (United Nations, 2011). Occupation as a demonstrable act through sit-ins, marches, chants, banners and even artistic performance, brings to light what has been generally hidden from public debate and contestation. It signals a break, we could say, a breach from ordinary life occurrences. This break jolts the collective unconscious from its dormant state of mind and through collective displays of protest, creates the conditions for individuals to barreldown the unknown path of revolt, that is, if a tear-gas canister does not stop them dead in their tracks. There is a message the Occupy Movement clearly conveys: we generate strength in conviviality, reciprocity and mutual support. The neoliberal state’s assault on the collective – vis-à-vis parcelling of land, work, resources and knowledge – has challenged our capability to change the course of history and to simply, live in a

world of our own making. The Occupy Movement reminds us that solidarity aimed toward social change is not encrypted in Fukuyama's "end of history."

The Occupation Movement is both a spatial and temporal act of protest. The banners that hang from the light posts in front of the Greek Parliament in Syntagma Square bear the symbolic residue of governments gone afoul in times past, as the symbol of the helicopter (which has gained traction in the popular uprising) works at the level of an allegory for Argentina's economic crisis. In 2001, the Argentine capital swelled with defiant protesters. After days of rioting that left 22 people dead, then President Fernando de la Rúa fled the government palace in a black-hawk chopper. Since then, the heavier-than-air craft has turned into the symbol of the power in acts of popular defiance that have led to deposed government representatives. That is, until we forget. The people of Greece have not forgotten, though, and helicopter – in both word and image – heeds the removal of heads of parliament. The image of the helicopter also works at another, yet occluded level. Recalling the economic shutdown of Argentina should also bring to mind what followed occupation, and the efforts (with sundry degrees of success) of workers, youth, and artists to recuperate the public sphere (see Jaramillo, McLaren and Lazaro, 2011).

When the banks declared bankruptcy and the owners closed their factories, thousands of workers across Argentina took it upon themselves to take over the means of production. Initially, these factories were called occupied, but workers, youth and artists have since made the important distinction that they were not occupied, but recuperated. The spaces we occupy in protest need to be recuperated altogether. They were and continue to be *ours*. Moreover, to recuperate implies that another set of ideas and concepts will outline an oppositional logic and epistemic framework for the formation of a *relational* cultural space (Bourriaud, 2002), one that has been crystallized from the sweat of human interaction. For such a project to be realized, education plays a necessary and decisive role, as fundamental questions about the production of knowledge, a citizenry and indeed a (global) nation, are connected to pedagogical activity that produce the practices occupation opposes. Many of these questions emerge from a consideration and understanding of the impact that colonialism has had on how communities both participate in and contest capitalism's overriding logic.

### **Recuperate and Decolonize**

There is a fundamental tension in political and social theory that raises important questions about the relationship between colonialism and capital. In various academic circles, the notion of colonialism is understood as merely an additive to modern capitalist society and not a constituent of it (Castro-Gomez, 2008). Colonialism has been regarded as an epiphenomenal 'effect' related to the consolidation of global markets (Castro-Gomez, 2008) and perhaps in more vulgar terms, a necessary stage for industrialization and the eventual arrival of communism in the so-called developing world. In post-colonial and post-modern descriptions, colonialism is equally misarticulated as a thing of the past, whose residues are most clearly characterized as shaping our nature of 'being,' our consciousness, identity, and epistemological frameworks. Interrogating and rupturing the subjective imaginary becomes the central focus of the post-isms, seemingly without any materialist grounding from which to articulate a political project.

Colonialism, however, was an economic and political phenomenon *and* it also possessed an epistemological dimension (Castro-Gomez, 2008). Capital and colonialism are twin skin to all of our identities. We are the heirs of a global colonial and capitalist system and live through its manifestations in the social relations of everyday life. The ‘democratic’ form attributed to the capitalist free market is connected to various forms of expansion and intervention that are not limited to territorial control, alone. The media, schools, the production of knowledge, cultural formations, the relationship to nature and to our communities, are predicated on a system of intelligibility that is both capitalist and colonial. Ultimately, what we have today is coloniality, a concept that educators, students and workers such as those in the recuperated factories in Argentina have recognized, as they continue the struggle to put alternative forms of sociability and productive work in place. Here, the relationship between education and a homogenizing state apparatus that accommodates to capital’s value form and that imposes a pedagogical encounter to advance the capitalist state is understood in multiple dimensions that shape the intimate forms that people come to identify themselves as either periphery or central to the dominant capitalist culture. These are important ‘places’ of resistance and of possibility that breathe life into efforts to recuperate the public sphere. Occupation in this instance becomes more about reclaiming and rearticulating the social frames that shape everyday interactions and the production of knowledge. Such movements imply a revolution in permanence that does not end with a change in economic or social policy, but that signals an ongoing struggle toward anchoring relations of production in a different set of concepts that articulate more humane and sensuous forms of social interaction.

Coloniality (as opposed to “colonialism”) is an ideological formation that is manifested as an according to an overlapping system of racial, ethnic, gendered, economic, sexual, and cultural hierarchies (or what Ramón Grosfoguel terms “heterarchies”). The conquest and colonization that tragically marked the so-called founding of the Americas was attached to an evolving economic system of differentiation between those who claimed ownership of land and resources and those who were subjected to extract resources from land in order to generate profits for the plantocracy. But these economic relations were “entangled” in a structure that shaped power relations within and across other metrics of social identity and identification. The decolonial philosopher Anibal Quijano refers to this “entanglement” as the “coloniality of power” (2000). Quijano’s notion of the “coloniality of power” affirms “that there is no overarching capitalist accumulation logic that can instrumentalize ethnic/racial divisions and that precedes the formation of a global colonial, eurocentric culture” (Grosfoguel, 2008). Quijano’s notion that racism is constitutive and entangled with the international division of labor and capitalist accumulation at a world-scale suggests that multiple forms of labor co-exist within a single historical process and that, according to Grosfoguel (2008), “free” forms of labor were assigned to the core or European origin populations and “coerced” forms of labor assigned to the periphery or non-European populations according to the racist Eurocentric rationality of the “coloniality of power”. According to Grosfoguel, those elements that give the coloniality of power its appearance as multiple, intersecting, and entangled hierarchies include race/ethnicity, sexuality, spirituality, language, epistemology, an interstate system of political-military organizations controlled by European males, an international division of labor of core and periphery, and a

particular global class formation that situated nation-states geopolitically. Within this framework, coloniality is understood as constitutive of modernity and not derivative of or accidental to it.

Entanglement is a category that can help us move away from the dualisms that shape educational practices and relationships to a more robust and dialectical understanding of how social actors—and their social location—shape the “culture” (and structure) associated with school sites. Entanglement binds individuals into an indivisible whole. This is not just an epistemic proposition; it is grounded in a scientific understanding of the properties that bind organisms – including people -- together in the physical realm. To quote the *Scientific American*, “A classical system is always divisible, at least in principle; whatever collective properties it has arise from components that themselves have certain properties. But an entangled system cannot be broken down in this way. Entanglement has strange consequences. Even when the entangled particles are far apart, they still behave as a single entity, leading to what Einstein famously called ‘spooky action at a distance’” (Vedral, 2011, 41). In other words, entanglement—a term derived from quantum physics—is an observable phenomenon that offers explanatory power for how it is that social systems (and organisms) are organically interdependent. Understanding this phenomenon has concerned physical scientists for millennia, and philosophers have contemplated the “unity” (or disunity) of social life equally as long. Breaking down organisms into “particles” or social life into measurable “variables” is connected to an effort to understand how meaning is generated in the social totality. More often than not, however, interconnections are obscured from social analysis, which then allows the system to behave “classically.” It is on this point that the Occupy Movement of the U.S., for example, has undergone criticism from indigenous and decolonial perspectives. Narrowing the focus of protest to a banking system gone awry, or a housing bubble gone bust, fragments the processes of capitalist expansion and exploitation that include and are constitutive of colonialism and the radical dispossession of native lands and peoples.

The notion of coloniality of power is central in linking the subjective dimensions of coloniality to the material relations of exploitation in that it attempts to “integrate as part of a heterogeneous structural process the multiple relations in which cultural, political and economic processes are entangled in capitalism as a historical system” (Grosfoguel, 2008). With respect to questions of gender and sexuality, decolonial feminists have critiqued and extended concepts of coloniality to address the “processes by which the colonial invention of gender operated” (Maese-Cohen, 2009, 11). Altogether, decolonial thinkers and pedagogues examine the fundamental organization of society through a historical lens that addresses how and under which conditions the concepts of ‘race,’ ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ (among others) came into being in the process of conquest and colonization of the Americas. Moreover, decolonial theories of liberation demonstrate that the struggle for humanization needs to be waged on multiple fronts, which includes an interrogation of the dominant worldviews that shape how we come to know ourselves, our relationships to one another, to nature, to the nation, and to the global community in general. The point here is to understand how lived oppression becomes a way of life within the colonial matrix of power – a matrix that is constitutive of capitalist society -- and to engage in a multi-pronged effort to contest the economic, political, ecological and social injustices that are waged against the dispossessed.

The Occupy Movements of this era are a direct response to the highly concentrated economic power of transnational, neoliberal capitalism. But this concentration of wealth and power has always been part of our global capitalist system and marginalized peoples across the globe have historically experienced it differentially. To reiterate Adrienne Rich's timeless prose, a place on the map is a place in history. In other words, when the economic crisis and Occupy Movement of 2011 is analysed in geo-political and historical terms, it brings into focus the multi-dimensionality that needs to frame social protest. Not only does this movement need to be anti-capitalist, but it needs to be anti-colonialist as well, infused by a deep understanding and critique of the multiple forms and relations that generate capitalist accumulation and dispossession. Instead of parsing questions of colonialism from capitalism, we need to bring the discussion together. Our social and political theories can only benefit from this effort, to construct a world based upon an ethos of community, diversity, and pluriversality, or what indigenous intellectuals-activists and scholars of indigeneity refer to as *comunalidad*.

The *methodology of comunalidad* is what Lois Meyer and Benjamin Maldonado Alvarado describe as “the expression and patient consideration of many disparate points of view, collective and critical discussion, and consensual decision-making” (2010, p. 20). These expressions and considerations can translate into powerful mechanisms for social change, breaking down the need for borders, rewriting the construction of the ‘state’ from the bottom-up and ensuring popular civic employment from an early age, as youth begin to participate in educational structures that nurture rather than dominate. It is in the process of excavating from our historical architectonic that we can begin to advocate for a recuperated and decolonized future.

The colonialist idea of *terra nullius*, vacant lands, imprinted upon the earth a system of exploitation that is neither natural nor inevitable to conceptions of social progress. The compulsory modernization that arrived with capitalism indelibly affected our very species-being. As the Oaxacan educator Gustavo Esteva notes, “in the material processes of capitalist production, Marx warned, the worker is confronted constantly with the intellectual powers of the system of exploitation, which were unknown to him previously” (2010, p. 123). The social relations of exploitation have affected workers and indigenous peoples alike, setting in motion a global order of heterarchies and unilateral visions of what constitutes human development. An unnecessary adhesion to theoretical dogma is rampant across academic disciplines and it is on this point that efforts to recuperate and decolonize our public institutions hold great promise.

The Occupy Movement presents us with a unique time in history, when a united front can be established to contest not only the economic relations that have led to widespread poverty and inequality, but that can also attend to the problematic of social exclusion to which decolonial thinkers draw our attention. These are the new developments in social theory and praxis that propel the movement toward equity forward, and that establish a form of ‘border thinking’ that gains momentum by the participation of the dispossessed. The dispossessed experience oppression on multiple and interconnected fronts. In recuperating our social institutions and decolonizing our knowledge frameworks, we are well positioned to overcome what Hannah Arendt called “world alienation,” (1958) that “radical sense of disconnection and alienation from the physical and social world we share with others” (Mackler, 2010). The

pedagogical processes involved in overcoming this form of bodily, spiritual, social and physical alienation are far and disquietingly removed from where education – in its vast global sweep – currently stands. The key point worth remembering, however, is that we already occupy the institution of education. Now is the urgent moment to recuperate and decolonize it, and with it our knowledge and our relationships to one another.

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