

(Re-)Occupy Critique! The Condition of Theory and Praxis in Contemporary American Academia

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Political activism should not be taken for granted in academia; it is a project that requires the creation of an adequate environment for critique and action. That is because, rephrasing Gramsci's recommendation (Gramsci 1971, 175), social change needs both the practical 'optimism of the will' and the theoretical social diagnostics provided by the 'pessimism of the intellect.' Based on such assumptions, the paper points out the necessity, on the one hand, to go beyond an idealist conceptualization of the intellectual and instead to look materially at the field of action of academics, and, on the other, to problematize the currently dominant theoretical understanding of critique.

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Material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates ad hominem, and it demonstrates ad hominem as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter (Marx 1970, ii).

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rephrasing Gramsci's recommendation (Gramsci 1971, 175), social change needs both the practical 'optimism of the will' and the theoretical social diagnostics provided by the 'pessimism of the intellect'. Based on such assumptions, the paper points out the necessity, on the one hand, of going beyond an idealist conceptualization of the intellectual and instead to materially look at the field of action of academics. On the other hand, it also problematizes the currently dominant theoretical understanding of critique.

First of all, this paper discusses the problems implied by the divi-

sion between manual and intellectual labor which produces an understanding of the intellectual as an ahistorical abstraction. Rejecting such an idealization, the paper tries to rematerialize the intellectual by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's political economic analysis. The paper briefly examines the 'hegemonic' regime of (American) National Communication Association (NCA) in order to exemplify how material dynamics taking place in such a setting can potentially keep the critical spirit in check, caught between the contradictory twofold mechanisms of the political economy of academic production: the orthodox working within the framework of established paradigms and the heterodox striving or drive to produce intellectual novelty.

Second, the paper examines the kind of critique proliferating in the contemporary theoretical environment which functions more as a self-referential discourse of critique rather than a tool for practical activism. Accordingly, it argues how the adoption of specific readings – contextualized in the post-structuralist tradition – offer an understanding of social determination and signification that diminishes the history-making role of the subject. The goal here is not to dismiss post-structuralism as a whole, but to point out how some of its influential interpreters have significantly shaped the contemporary idea of political action. In contrast to such an approach, the

paper proposes an understanding of critique that 'thematizes and seeks to surpass the limits set by prevailing social relations' (Callinicos 2006, 6) because the present author assumes a steady and simultaneously dialectical link between consciousness and social reality.

Finally, in the third part, the paper utilizes the leading narratives depicting Occupy Wall Street (OWS) as a 'new' social movement in order to exemplify both the practical manifestations of such a theoretical trend and to advance an alternative framework which places the thought of Gramsci at its core. It will be argued that the possibility of intervention for social change is better served by a holistic and materialist conceptualization of hegemony. Such a project requires both going beyond the tendentially one-sided discursive dimension of social struggle found in the prevailing discourse on OWS and re-engaging instead with what Gramsci defines as the 'integral state': the state + civil society. Accordingly, the paper suggests revisiting the figure of the organic intellectual who, as a first step in his/her objective to be active in the public and political sphere, recognizes academia as a material sphere of production of social reality and therefore as a first site of praxis.

The Idealized and the Materialized Intellectual

Conceptualizations of 'the intellectual' abound in modern social

theory but they all seem to lack a straightforward definition. Max Weber (1958) describes intellectuals as functionaries, producers of ideas intrinsically committed to rationality. Karl Mannheim (1936) maintained that intellectuals are ideologues that constitute the world view of society. For Talcott Parsons (1969), intellectuals serve as cultural specialists in a society organized by the division of labor. Lewis Coser (1997) believed that they are people living for rather than living off ideas. Finally, Vladimir Lenin (1902) maintains that they constitute the avant-garde within a class struggle.

The problem of identifying intellectuals is not simply of a descriptive kind; it also overlaps with a normative idealist thrust. For instance, on the one hand, intellectuals may be regarded as seers of a better society; on the other, they are often blamed for having transformed the university into a site of privilege. Julien Benda (1928), several decades ago, illustrated the general social rapprochement against scholars who 'betrayed their duty, which is precisely to set up a corporation whose sole cult is that of justice and of truth' (Benda 1928, 57).

Why is the attempt to define the identity/function of intellectuals in contemporary Western societies so difficult? One possible explanation links such problems of definition to a tradition of thought that has produced over time a series of Cartesian dualisms separating ideas

from practice, consciousness from being, and the private from the public sphere. These dualisms presume that people can work either intellectually or manually, taking care of either their spiritual or their corporeal needs. Based on such assumptions, the goal of locating intellectuals in the social map is crippled by a tendency to understand such a category in the framework of the very social division of labor that consistently relegates them in the same ethereal province of ideas, therefore outside the sphere of material production.

Materializing the Intellectual in the Field of the Academia

The social and mental separation is, paradoxically, never clearer than in the attempts – often pathetic and ephemeral – to rejoin the real world, particularly through political commitments (Stalinism, Maoism, etc.) whose irresponsible utopianism and unrealistic radicality bear witness that they are still a way of denying the realities of the social world. (Bourdieu 2010, 41).

As already mentioned, the intellectual integrated inside the university system seems to be particularly exposed to social rapprochement because of privileges such as academic freedom: the right of inquiry, to teach and communicate ideas protected by the academic tenure. However, while certainly not absent,

academic freedom must be contextualized within the constraints of the political economy of universities. Failing to acknowledge the economic forces shaping such a field prevents a full comprehension of at least two fundamental aspects: it tends to provide an ahistorical definition of intellectuals based on theoretical abstractions rather than on the concrete analysis of their role in historic-specific social formations; second, it prevents an equally concrete examination of their practices, their labor, their field and the level of conditioning of material constraints.

A first important step towards a more material approach is provided by Bourdieu's (1988) sociological analysis of higher education. Bourdieu describes universities as a field in which class structure, power, and a specific form of intellectual habitus intersect each other. Social subjects continuously struggle for power, for scarce resources, and for the 'legitimation of particular definitions and classifications of the social world' (Bourdieu 1988, 23). Bourdieu's goal is to provide a framework that allows the intersection of the individual agency of intellectuals with structural dynamics of the field in order to identify 'the tendency of structures to reproduce themselves by producing agents endowed with the system of predispositions which is capable of engendering practices adapted to the structures and thereby contributing to the reproduction of the structures' (Bourdieu 1977, 487).

As intellectual operators, academics create a form of cultural capital that is subordinate to economic capital, but that allows them to control the 'language' of dominant culture in a society. The possession of such capital places intellectuals in a very specific sphere in the social structure: they belong to the dominant class insofar as they enjoy the privileges derived from the accumulation of cultural capital, while still depending on economic capital. Such a location implies a continuous negotiation for a better exchange rate between these two forms of capital. Both the composition and the amount of capital potentially possessed by agents stratify the field; hence, agents occupy alternatively dominant and subordinate positions.

Bourdieu claims that the monopoly of educational credentials held by academics allows them to both reproduce the value of cultural capital and the existing social structure:

Education is in fact one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a social gift treated as a natural one (Bourdieu 1974, 32).

Another important way in which cultural capital is reproduced is by the naturalization of its epistemological and ontological foundations by

producing *doxa* knowledge, 'an adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident' (Bourdieu 1994, 160).

The production of *doxa* knowledge is never completely attained and entails both a level of contestation that Bourdieu defines as *heterodoxa* and its reactionary reaffirmation, defined as *orthodoxa*:

It is only when the dominated have the material and symbolic means of rejecting the definition of the real that is imposed on them through logical structures reproducing the social structures (i.e. the state of the power relations) and to lift the (institutionalized or internalized) censorships which it implies ... that the arbitrary principles of classification can appear as such and it therefore becomes necessary to undertake the work of conscious systematization and express rationalization which marks the passage from *doxa* to orthodoxy. Orthodoxy ... opinion, which aims, without ever entirely succeeding, at restoring the primal state of *doxa*, exists only in the objective relationship which opposes it to heterodoxy (Bourdieu 1977, 169).

The tension between *orthodoxa* and *heterodoxa* reflects the confrontation between established intellectuals who pursue methods of

conserving their positions and subvert intellectuals who challenge the power of the former through subversive strategies.

Furthermore, such a critical relationship between *orthodoxa* and *heterodoxa* also provides a politico-economic explanation related to my considerations on the conditional position of critique. In fact, un-established intellectuals in the field experience a fundamental tension between differentiation and legitimation that reveals the contradictory nature of cultural capital; cultural capital needs both to negate existing knowledge to become desirable (because novelty relates to the progress of knowledge, and because academia lives the enlightenment myth that the best idea will prevail through struggle, so 'novelty' sometimes uncritically translates into 'good'), but also needs validation *vis-à-vis* the established knowledge.

Critique, as scrutiny of the given conditions, tends to problematize the status quo, therefore establishing theories and paradigms dogmatized as *doxa* and reinforced as *orthodoxa*. Such an impasse materializes at the level of reproduction of academic labor and its reliance on accreditation through publications. For instance, in several American 'Research-1' universities, the possibility for a young scholar to attain material stability heavily depends on his/her capability to be tenured. At least in the North American media and communication field, the

area in which the present author moves, most of publications listed in the tenure review process are valued and hierarchically ordered according to a rather problematic criterion; the worthy publications are the ones provided by 'top tiers journals', which are the ones affiliated to the (American) National Communication Association (NCA) press.

The special authority and credit given to NCA publications not only reveal a rather overt ethnocentrism that lies in friction with the alleged universalist ideology of modern universities (*Magna Charta Universitatum* 1988) but also tends to reproduce a conservative dynamic. In fact, the popular argument supporting such an arrangement is that scholarly works 'capitalizable' towards the tenure review are considered significant when published in journals with the highest level rate of rejection. However, the higher rejection rate does not necessarily translate into higher scholarly/ intellectual authority, but it may reflect instead the systemic tendency of most American institutions to adopt the same criteria— i.e. only NCA journals count as top tiers for tenure review—and therefore most people, as workers seeking more stability through tenure or academic recognition, compete to publish in those journals.

Summing up, a first step to evaluate the possibility of intervention for the intellectual integrated in aca-

demia is to go beyond the idealized conceptualization of the university as a retreated-from-the-worldly sphere in which one can cultivate ideas based on pure vocation and disinterested ideals. Thus, the just mentioned example was meant to describe an environment in which the intellectual's capacity to perform social critique and intervention is highly conditioned by a politico-economic system which reproduces itself by *orthodoxa*. And critique, as critique of the given, tends to consistently conflict with such force.

In the following section, the paper will explore another important aspect affecting the capability of intervention and activism: the theoretical assumptions of critique. In fact, behind activism and intervention lie specific assumptions about a conception of history and a role of the subject, according to which the latter is assumed to actively act upon the former. In relation to that, the paper will shed light on how the adoption of specific epistemological and ontological positions substantially diminishes the role of the subject in making history, therefore bringing social change.

The Negation of the 'Historic Subject'

In the specific field of communication studies, the idealization of the intellectual manifests itself with the emergence of rhetoric of critique. That is a meta-discourse (Shugart 2003) that instead of exploring the

practical implications of critique, celebrates its own discourse. Such a discourse is inhabited by the exhortations of scholars such as Ramie Mckerrow (1989) advocating a critique of the discourse of the powerful, and Kent Ono and John Sloop (1995) encouraging greater focus on the discourse of the weak. One plausible reason for such a rhetorically-centered understanding of critique may be found in the specific elements of an ontological and epistemological framework that trades the agency of the historical subject for discursive determinations. Accordingly, in this section, I explore how the consistent embracement in the last decades (Cloud 2006) of the thought of specific post-structuralist authors, has importantly contributed to create a theoretical environment that prevents intervention because of how the relationship between the subject, meaning, and historical agency is conceived. For this reason, I first briefly describe how Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida conceptualize the subject. I then address articulation theory as a theory of signification and social determination, which I think exemplifies the impact of such a mode of thinking in critical cultural studies in general, and in communication more specifically.

From Representation to Signification

From a communication studies perspective, a significant portion of the post-structuralist tradition works

with the assumption that there is no direct relationship between signifier and signified and between linguistic representational power and the reality represented. It problematizes 'language' as a representation of both thought and reality, and thus rejects meaning as a given and describes meaning as the product of the different relations between signs. As William Riordan (2008) observes, signs do not connect a word to a material referent, but instead connect a concept to a language. Therefore, as a system of pure relations of difference, a sign signifies, rather than represents, reality. In this section, the paper offers a brief account of the consistent tendency to privilege the assumption that meaning resides in the structure or organization of language, as can be found in the positions of thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida and Stuart Hall.

Foucault (1972) understood discourse as a framework through which one can historicize powerful claims of truth such as the ontological foundation of the subject:

Discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined (Foucault 1972, 60).

Foucault tackles the status of the subject by both undermining a

teleological understanding of history and the possibility of an objective knowledge. One rather eloquent example appears in Foucault's (1973) account of the parricide case of Pierre Rivière by analysing documents from Rivière's trial as well as Rivière's personal reflections on his life. Foucault's conclusions focussed not so much on the historic subject (Pierre Rivière) but on the particular discursive practices that embodied the subject Rivière. Discourse constitutes, disciplines and enables Rivière, to the point that his story is not about the subject but a 'battle among discourse, through discourses' (Foucault 1973, *iii*). As a result, the individual becomes an empty region determined by the intersection of discourses.

Then, in his late work, Foucault shifts from linguistic to power determinism; the subject seems to acquire more agency, but only within the limits of the irreducible framework of power, as the concept of resistance demonstrates. Foucauldian power is so ubiquitous and all-encompassing that resistance can only take place in a framework of power: 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (Foucault 1976, 95). Thus, as Anthony Giddens claims, for Foucault, power is the real subject of history (Giddens 1984, 80). However, such an anti-humanist approach does not necessarily annihilate the subject, but rather immobi-

lizes it. In fact, power and the subject operate in a dialectical relationship. '[T]he exercise of power continually transforms a diagram's mechanisms of power, yet is only possible through the utilization of those same pre-existing mechanisms' (Foucault 1976, 85). However, such dialectics does not move through positive syntheses as in the Marxist tradition but remains paralyzed in a stall.

If Foucault celebrates the death of the subject, Derrida radically decentres it through deconstruction as well as dismantles the ground on which people can meaningfully act. On the one hand, the subject comes under scrutiny as another grand narrative:

What differs? Who differs? What is *différance*? if we accepted this form of the question, in its meaning and its syntax ('What is?' 'Who is?' 'What is that?') we would have to conclude that *différance* has been derived, has happened, is to be mastered and governed on the basis of the point of a present being as a Subject, a who (Derrida 1991, 65).

On the other hand, Derrida carries out an important attack against the epistemological and ontological basis of action:

Within the metaphysics of presence, within philosophy as knowledge of the presence of the object, as the being-before-oneself of knowledge in consciousness

the history of being as presence, as self-presence in absolute knowledge, as consciousness of self in the infinity of parousia – this history is closed. The history of presence is closed, for history has never meant anything but the presentation [Gegenwärtigung] of being, the production and recollection of beings in presence, as knowledge and mastery (Derrida 1973, 102).

Derrida intends to replace ontological presence with 'hauntology,' an experience that is not open to the present, but is rather linked to the past or possibly the future; as he writes, 'No *différance* without alterity, no alterity without singularity, no singularity without the here-and-now' (Derrida 1994, 30). From such a perspective, Derrida criticizes the remnants of metaphysics in structuralism – the unifying principle as characterized within the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss. A closed, unified structure fixes meaning, according to original structuralist theory, but for Derrida, this structuring principle simply vanishes.

Within this system, the human agent remains incapable of discerning reality and acting upon given circumstances because any system of reference (such as language) 'is constituted "historically" as a weave of differences' (Derrida 1982, 12). In this sense, Derrida's thought seems much more concerned with the structural rules regulating the

ground of activity of the subject rather than the subject itself. Whereas the subject may have a place within the landscape of action, it is very difficult to determine what that role in terms of agency looks like. In fact, '*différance*' posits a moment of presence for the subject, in which the real appears to be accessed in the meaningful connection of the subject's action and the concrete repercussion in social reality. However, such presence is ultimately constantly deferred (Callinicos 2006).

To sum up, Foucault and Derrida have created a theoretical environment that deprives the subject of both knowledge and historical agency. The epistemological break initiated by such a tradition has affected, even more importantly, critical cultural studies through the theory of articulation. Articulation, one of the most generative concepts in contemporary critical cultural studies, refers to an epistemological theory that works as 'a way of thinking the structures of what we know as a play of correspondences, or correspondences and contradictions, as fragments in the constitution of what we take to be unities' (Slack 1996, 113).

Hall (1980) and Ernesto Laclau (1977) provide a contemporary theorization of articulation, but the idea possesses a lineage going back to Louis Althusser (1970), and further back to Marx's (1973) understanding of mediation but a considerable distance from the original conceptualization of articulation to its con-

temporary understanding remains in place. Marx, while describing how ideological mediation rules the subordinate class, refers to an 'articulated' model of social dominance and determinism (1973, 64); in contrast, Hall describes articulation as 'a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all times' (Hall 1986, 53).

Althusser (1970) and Laclau (1977) provide the theoretical mediation necessary for the transition between Marx's and Hall's understandings of the concept. Althusser conceptualized 'articulation' by replacing a linear causality with a complex network of contradictory correspondences. More significantly, he upgrades ideology from an epiphenomenal status to serving as the crucial site of social production; by shaping subjects through interpellation, ideology constrains the subject's autonomy and agency: 'Ideology interpellates individuals as Subjects' (Althusser 1970, 170). Althusser claims that the idea of oneself as a Subject, author of your own destiny, is an illusion fostered by ideology because history is a process without subject.

In this respect, Laclau (1977) builds on both Althusser's ideological turn and on an idealist understanding of Gramsci's concept of hegemony. He formulates a theory of articulation in which discourse becomes both the level in which class interests and class antagonism materialize themselves, and the ground upon which hegemony is construct-

ed, maintained, and contested. In other words, social reality does not exist independently from the way it is discursively constructed: 'the main consequence of a break with the discursive/extra discursive dichotomy is the abandonment of the thought/reality opposition' (110). Hegemony, for Laclau and Mouffe (1985), seems to be examined more for its openness, exposure to challenge and instability, than for its constitutive capability of reproducing an existing social order. In fact, both authors expand the Derridean deconstructive principle according to which reality never accomplishes 'closed and fully constituted totality' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 106) because such reality is consistently subverted by the inherent tendency of signification to transcend any semantic limitations.

Finally, Hall turns the metaphor of articulation almost into its negation (Slack 1996). As Shane Gunster underscores (Gunster 2005, 180), Hall jumps from the position of Raymond Williams (1977) and Edward Thompson (1964), which retains a strong sense of social determination between social practice and social position, to the post-structuralist paradigm, that sees the real as mediated by ideology with no required correspondence between the parts and the social whole:

the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not neces-

sary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? The so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness.' The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected (Hall 1996, 141).

Articulation as conceptualized by Hall's approach resonates with Derrida's signification. No required correspondence between the representation and the meaning of the fragment exists, because the latter can attach to any structure of signification, thus creating the articulation of a myriad of factors that interact in complicated and contradictory ways.

Concluding this section, the assessment of the relationship between theory and praxis for the sake of critique must include the problem of what a theory can and cannot do. Assuming that practical intervention requires the critical work of the intellect that determines 'what is to be done,' then what is required is an epistemology and ontology that can identify the real, a stable ground capable of guaranteeing a meaningful correspondence between our purposeful actions and their outcomes.

Instead, the authors just reviewed, with their discursive understanding of reality and its semantic indeterminacy, dissolve individual and social determination into open semiosis.

In order to exemplify the concrete implications of such a theoretical environment, I would like to discuss how, via the New Social Movements perspective, such a mode of doing critique understands Occupy Wall Street and its agency.

Post-structuralist Elements of 'Occupy' Social Mobilization

The current dominant discourse on social mobilization represents a concrete ground where the limitations of the aforementioned perspectives on envisioning transformative praxis become evident. Via the theoretical perspective popularly defined as New Social Movements, such a tradition has affected the way social movements and their agenda are conceptualized. After a brief contextualization of the New Social Movement approach, I provide the specific example of the existing narratives on Occupy Wall Street (OWS), and will show how the agency of the movement is reduced to strategies of discursive construction and interruption.

The discourse of newness of the so-called New Social Movements perspective derives from the assumption that in the last decades, capitalist societies have gone through drastic changes extensively affecting states, markets, civil so-

ciety and the way labor and value are conceptualized. For instance, post-structuralist thinkers such as Maurizio Lazzarato (1986), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) and Paolo Virno (2004) have shifted the analysis of contemporary capitalism from empirically grounded categories such as capital, labor and commodity-object, to cognitive capital, 'immaterial labor,' and the 'commodity-sign.'

Such a narrative of profound historic changes has stimulated a reconceptualization of the meaning of social movements, which started to be referred to as New Social Movements, a new paradigm for social action. The old paradigm is associated with movements identifiable as socio-economic groups, demanding economic growth and distribution of material resources; emphasizing freedom and equality; and assessing a political agenda through political party (Offe 1987). The new paradigm focuses on movements formed by diverse socio-economic strata (Klandermans and Oegema 1987); mobilized by symbolic and cultural factors appealing to what has been defined as 'identity politics' (Melucci 1989); tending to frame actions in terms of further democratization of society (Larana 1993); privileging informality and spontaneity; and emphasizing unsettled protest politics based on demands formulated predominantly in negative terms, without a clear ideological characterization

(Cohen 1985).

As a whole, the idea of New Social Movements relies on the assumption of an epistemological break often enabled by the post-structuralist emphasis on discursive practices which implies a turn from material concerns—such as labor and wellbeing—to symbolic ones (Swords 2007), and the adoption of language-based forms of contestation of codes in highly mediated societies (Gitlin 1980). This body of research is thus prevalently informed by social constructionist principles of the post-structuralist tradition which emphasizes the role that discursive processes play in producing our understandings of people, issues, and events (Edelman 1988).

Such a new perspective on social mobilization abandoned the emphasis on class structure analysis and the emphasis on categories such as labor or capital (Larana, Johnston and Gusfield 1994). It tends to assume a substantial and epochal difference between the historical context of 'old' and 'new' social movements. These scholars also place themselves in overt opposition to what they consider they alter: namely, orthodox Marxism. Thus, as David Plotke (1995) observes, this perspective develops by presenting an obliged choice between two poles: to embrace orthodox Marxism, or to reverse its terms completely.

More or less explicitly informed by such assumptions, several in-

tellectuals and commentators have recently intervened to endorse Occupy Wall Street (hereafter OWS). The movement started its 'occupation' on 17 September 2011, when a diffuse group of activists organized a protest called 'Occupy Wall Street' and camped in Zuccotti Park, a privately owned park in New York's financial district. Influenced by similar initiatives in Northern Africa and Western Europe (Kerton 2012; Castañeda 2012), 'Occupiers' were protesting against the corruption of the democratic process due to social inequality, corporate greed, and the erosion of life opportunities for the great majority of the population—as one of the most repeated group's slogans, 'we are the 99 per cent,' clearly asserted.

A brief survey of examples of commentaries about OWS provides a sense of the possibilities for agency in post-structuralist thought. Most of the recommendations, as Cloud (2006) suggests, can be defined as 'micro-strategies of discursive interruption' (Cloud 2006, 236) or of discursive construction. In other words, it is assumed that power is omnipresent, diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and regimes of truth, consistently under negotiation (Foucault 1991). Power is discursively constructed and can be discursively disrupted by the action 'of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time'

(Rabinow 1991, 75).

For instance, Judith Butler, on 2 October 2011, stated in front of OWS participants that 'we are assembling in public, we are coming together as bodies in alliance in the street and in the square, we're standing here together making democracy in acting the phrase, "We The People"' (quoted in Taylor and Gessen 2012, 193). What is exactly the level of realization of people's sovereignty represented by the expression, 'We the People' that Butler describes? In her book *Excitable Speech* (1997), Butler considers resistance to be the equivalent to the margins created by the instability of discourses; such margin can be capitalized through performative action.

Accordingly, Butler invites OWS to express the sovereignty of the people by the material and symbolic presence of their own bodies. But the materiality serves only the objective to reproduce a discourse of power. In line with such a position, in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), drawing on Foucault, Butler claims that:

power imposes itself on us, and weakened by its force, we come to internalise or accept its terms. Power, that first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity. It is the internalisation of the "discourse" of power that cre-

ates the Subject. Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse (Butler 1997, 2).

Slavoj Žižek, several days before Butler's statement, compared Occupy to the 'Red Ink,' a metaphor to express the movement's capability to give voice to discontent:

'This is how we live. We have all the freedoms we want. But what we are missing is red ink: the language to articulate our non-freedom. The way we are taught to speak about freedom— war on terror and so on—falsifies freedom' (quoted in Taylor and Gesen 2012, 67).

Therefore, according to Žižek, the role of Occupy is understood as giving voice to discontent rather than acting upon the causes for such dissatisfaction. Both Butler's and Žižek's interventions exemplify an understanding of agency that is supposed to translate into social change in virtue of its discursive performativity. However, emancipation-from-domination and 'resistance' to it should not be conflated (Couzens-Hoy 2005); they are certainly linked but the former does not necessarily follow the latter.

Certainly, Butler and Žižek do not share the same notion of discursive performativity as they clearly expressed in their publication coauthored with Laclau (2000). However,

in the same publication they also reveal a convergence into a ground in which social movements such as OWS would be placed as disempowered historic subjects. On the one hand, Butler understands OWS's agency as Foucauldian resistance which is constituted and determined by power, therefore it cannot escape the reproductive logic of the latter. On the other hand, Žižek believes that action of social movement should act beyond existing power logic; however, as Laclau commented in the same publication, he never really specifies how radical action would materialize, leaving the promise of praxis unfulfilled.

Similar approaches can be found by looking at the blogs of the 'Occupy' section on the American news website *Huffington Post*. It is remarkable to observe how most commentators (including several scholars and activists) consistently frame OWS's agency and its victories in discursive terms. I report here some of the most significant examples. Greg Ruggiero, acknowledging the success of OWS (30 April 2012), claims that 'Occupy has changed the national conversation, and it is important to acknowledge all the people who camped out, marched or went to jail to help make it happen'. Max Berger (4 May 2012) argues that 'Occupy transformed the public debate by naming the problem – inequality of wealth and power – and the cause – the power of Wall Street.' Nicholas Mirzoeff (9

September 2012), communications scholar, defines OWS's agency as 'to walk asking questions. And it's ok to get lost.'

Rebecca Solnit (17 September 2012), scholar and activist, relativizes the idea of the goals of social transformation of the society by reducing them to subjective positions: 'What does success mean? Who decides? By what standards? Who decides success? Success has to be decided by those people in struggle, those who are fighting or organizing for something.' Lisa Boyle (26 September 2012) believes that 'Commentators who declare the Occupy movement a failure underestimate the value of protest in a democracy and fail to acknowledge how the Occupy movement has already influenced public and political discourse.'

The New Social Movements' emphasis on discourse as an independent agent of social change is facilitated by authors such as Foucault (1972) according to whom ideas can bring historical transformation, and discourse is the set of linguistic patterns through which these ideas are articulated. Given the assumed discursive nature of a given socio-cultural system, this framework opens up the possibility of conceiving of a social movement as a way to discursively challenge a given regime of truth as semantic and semiotic struggle. The assumption, for such New Social Movements, is that 'collective identity is a product of a

conscious action and the outcome of self-reflection' rather than due to structural factors such as class (Melucci 1992, 10).

The prevailing narrative of OWS reflects the limited conceptual breadth of post-structuralist agency which abandons, for instance, class politics for micro identity politics. The commentaries I reviewed so far express a reticence in engaging with the concrete implication of its own discourse of change. There is then a mismatch between the goals that those commentaries imply for OWS and the means employed to reach them which can be related to what I previously defined as post-structuralism's weak sense of social determination. In other words, it is highly unclear how exactly discourse concretely engages with coercive and violent state apparatus or a political economic system funded on endless capital accumulation.

Trying to give a response to those questions, in the next and final section, I provide the 'pars construens' of the paper by proposing to embrace Gramsci's materialist understanding of the political development of a group in a framework of hegemony, and to revisit the Gramscian figure of the organic intellectual.

Hegemony and the Organic Intellectual

Parallel to the idealization of intellectuals that implies their abstraction from the material production of life of academics, New Social

Movement perspectives tend to overlook the pivotal part that relations of production, class structure and labor theory of value still play in explaining the emergence of dissent and consent, coercion and emancipation. In the case of OWS, many intellectuals informed by post-structuralist principles tend to conceptualize experience of the movement, emphasizing the contingency and the reversibility of cultural practices through strategies of discursive construction, discursive interruption, and cultural re-signification; however, these never completely challenge the structural determinations and productive forces of capital.

Such an approach to transformative praxis should be evaluated at the level effectiveness of social action to enhance social change. Purposeful and practical activism requires an understanding of reality in which the existing correspondence of propositions to their objects and the internal coherence of propositions parallels a representational (rather than re-signifying) correspondence both between language and reality and a given element of such reality and the whole (Carrol 1996). In other words, the intellectual who purposefully orients his/her actions towards an objective such as social change should still assume a degree of social determinism.

Accordingly, informed by a realist framework, he/she assumes that beyond ideology, discourse, and Derridean 'differance' exists a

ground in which events are linked through stable relations of signification and causality. The determinability of signifying and acting has been demonized in much of current social critique as a modernist fairy tale, as a grand narrative, as a principle of oppressive and disciplining power. However, I believe it is a necessary condition in a framework of activism, in which praxis is assumed to be causally linked to given political objectives and that powerful shared meaning can produce a collective (revolutionary) consciousness.

The importance of maintaining a framework characterized by social determinism and causation is expressed by Alex Callinicos when he argues in favour of 'a theory that was simultaneously explanatory and critical' (Callinicos 2005, 247) and Sheila Benhabib when advancing a critique that entails both an 'explanatory-diagnostic and an anticipatory-Utopian moment' (Benhabib 1986, 143). Callinicos and Benhabib point to the importance of a knowledge produced by critical thinking which must address both 'understanding'— the interpretation of the meaning of a given social phenomenon— and 'explanation'— the speculation about the causes of such event. In other words, assuming a 'dialectical interaction between shared experience and interpretation of that experience' (Cloud 2006, 342).

Conversely, when, as per the principles previously mentioned, the subject is deprived of his/her histo-

ry-making role, the idea of activism loses significance. Such a collapsing of reality into discourse may attain/approach Derrida's goal of eliminating the metaphysics of presence (1976) but, in the process, it also dissolves the humanist presupposition that people make history as well as change it. I believe that the Gramscian concept of hegemony has the potential to rescue critique from such a dead end.

The Materialized Intervention

Despite the consistent usage of the concept, scholars have rarely taken advantage of the full range of possibilities of hegemony. In his seminal article, Perry Anderson (1976) pointed out the ambiguities of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* in defining hegemony, which cause its interpretation to move unevenly along the axes of 'force' and 'consent', and 'civil society' and 'state.' In my view, the reason for such lack of definition in relation to those elements may be explained by the fact that hegemony is treated as a specific characteristic of one of those elements, instead of being considered as a quality of the social whole. In this sense, my goal is to revive a holistic understanding that does not lend itself to binaries such as material/symbolic, force/consent, state/civil society (Martinez and Briziarelli 2012, 296).

Such a holistic understanding should be first of all distinguished from hegemony understood as

dominant ideology (Zompetti 1997, 2003). As Cox argues (in Chase-Dunn et al. 1994), ideology, in the general Marxist interpretation, accounts for a functional relationship between base and superstructure or as a relationship between the 'real' and the 'imaginary' (Althusser 1970). Instead, hegemony should be considered as a quality of the social whole, reconciling social existence and consciousness as can be seen in Gramsci's essay of 'Americanism and Fordism' (1971).

Most existing scholarship has prioritized one particular aspect of such a description. For instance, many works have emphasized 'consent' and 'resistance' (e.g., Burnham 1991; Cox 1983; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Martin-Barbero 1983; Zompetti 1997, 2008). Many others have emphasized the coercive aspects and structural limitations (e.g., Anderson 1977; Arrighi 1994; Aune 2004; Taylor 1996). Conversely, I understand hegemony as:

'the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (Gramsci, 1971, 12).

Such a definition powerfully syn-

thetizes both force and consent, ideas and material existence.

In relation to the socially transformative aspirations of OWS and the privileging of the discursive perspective expressed by an allegedly post-structuralist sensibility, the objective in this paper is not to diminish the fundamental role played by discourse in producing/reproducing dominant narratives, regime of truths, and to ultimately close down the language of change and revolutions. It is rather to advance a view in which radical transformation is intrinsically tied to a wider and more holistic strategy consisting of the establishment of an alternative hegemonic order as Gramsci (1971) understood it.

Such a holistic understanding of hegemony may be beneficial to the way we approach a social movement such as OWS and the way intellectuals can contribute to envision and bring social change. Gramsci is convinced that a movement can radically transform a given society only by establishing an alternative hegemonic order which means acting both on its consensual and its coercive elements. Accordingly, he conceptualizes the political path of a group that seeks hegemony by the definition of a specific objective, the construction of a historic bloc, a 'synthesis of economic, political, intellectual, and moral leadership' (Gramsci 1971, 181).

Gramsci identifies three stages of political development for a group

that aims at the formation of a historic bloc. In the first stage, which he names 'economic-corporate,' people associate as a function of self-interest, recognizing that they need the support of others in order to retain their own security—as in the case of a trade union. In the second stage, 'Economic and social consciousness,' the group members become aware that there is a wider field of interests and that there are others who share certain interests with them and will continue to share those interests into the foreseeable future. It is at this stage that a sense of solidarity develops, but this 'solidarity' is still only on the basis of shared economic interests, and not on a common worldview. As Gramsci puts it, '... consciousness is reached of the solidarity of interests among all the members of a social class – but still in the purely economic field' (Gramsci 1971, 181).

However, consciousness of how they might benefit through the creation of a *new* system is still lacking. In the third, 'hegemonic' stage, the social group members become aware that their interests need to be extended beyond what they can do within the context of their own particular class. What is required to reach this more productive stage, argues Gramsci, is that other groups take the interests of this group as their own.

In relation to such vision of social mobilization, the commentaries I have examined tend to limit OWS to

the Gramscian intermediate stage in which the awareness of belonging to a similar situation (we are the 99%), i.e. an economic consciousness, is not followed by political consciousness: what Gramsci would define as 'a moment of superstructure built out of the base' (Gramsci 1971, 181). In other words, according to the commentaries, OWS should be feeling satisfied within the limits of an expression of discontent and resistance, without considering that resistance to a force does not necessarily translate into emancipation from it. According to Gramsci, such a political movement requires a double engagement at the level of civil society and the state.

For Gramsci, emancipation cannot only take place in the civil society, but requires emancipation from the state as well. Despite the popular belief among post-structuralist thinkers such as Hardt and Negri (2000) about the passing of the Westphalian system, states still represent the most powerful inertial system against social change. The modern state, for Gramsci, represents the coercive aspect of civil society, the powerful crystallization of class hegemony. For this reason, if the Gramscian idea of the 'war of position' (Gramsci 1971, 278) has the merit to discover the battleground of civil society, that does not imply at all the dismissal of the state as a terrain of confrontation. That is the state secures an inequality of production under the law of abstract equality (Bonefeld 2002, 129).

The confrontation I am suggesting with the state can be thought at two different levels: at the representative level of a political organization, and the level of agency of organic intellectuals. Due to the space constraints of the paper, I will concentrate more on the latter as it more directly concerns the subject of this paper: the praxis of intellectuals. As far as political organization is concerned, OWS would benefit from the creation of what Gramsci defines as 'Modern Prince' (Gramsci 1971, 253). The modern Prince represents a democratically-oriented central organization that could mediate different ideologies re-united under the 'historic bloc' represented by 'we are the 99%.'

Since, as Anderson claims, 'hegemony, although ethical-political, must be ultimately based on the economic function performed by the fundamental social group in production' (Anderson 1977, 19), the mediation of the 'Modern Prince' can intervene by bridging the sphere of production with the rest of social life. Similarly to the function of the proletarian public sphere (Negt and Kluge 1972), the 'Modern Prince' could mediate and articulate the different positions inside the vast ideological spectrum of the so-called '99%.' More concretely, in the case of OWS such structure could mediate between the structureless and leaderless associational forms of OWS (Gitlin 2012) and the highly hierarchized trade unions, allegedly their most proximate and relevant

ally. It could facilitate the 'chain of equivalence' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) between different groups and conceptually different concerns.

As already mentioned, the second level in which the state should be engaged involves more directly the possible intervention of academics who, once they are demystified of the role of the intellectual above the parts, and have acknowledged their condition as workers, could start operating as organic intellectuals.

Hall (1992), recalling the political commitment of British Cultural Studies, sheds light on the problem of re-contextualizing the Gramscian figure of the organic intellectual in different historical times: 'We were organic intellectuals without any organic point of reference; organic intellectuals with a nostalgia or will or hope [...] that at some point we would be prepared in intellectual work for that kind of relationship, if such a conjuncture ever appeared' (Hall 1992, 282).

So, what does it mean for an intellectual to be 'organic' in the current settings? Can we still conceptualize in the current division of labor and relations of production an intellectual defined by its class origin (Eyeman 1994; Karabel 1976; Said 1994; Sassoon 2000)? According to Gramsci (1971), the main difference between traditional and organic intellectuals is that the former aims at a universal and trans-historical knowledge and the latter at a socially grounded kind of knowledge.

In many ways, the idealized aspirations of intervention earlier mentioned reproduce the position of a traditional intellectual who, assuming to stand above society due to his/her moral virtue, comes down to intervene in human affairs as an Olympic god/dess. Conversely, the organic intellectual becomes the historic expression of a particular social group or strata because he/she embraces the awareness that theory is not for theory's sake but 'is always for someone and for some purpose' (Cox 1981, 128).

In this sense, within the context of the economic crisis, the contradiction that Bourdieu identified in being a 'dominated faction of the dominant class' may better underscore intellectuals' material condition as laborers more than idealized intellectuals and, in turn, help develop a more socially grounded critique because 'the starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is' (Gramsci 1971, 323). The fact that academics are entering the reserve army of labor (Chronicle of Higher Education 2010) and the precariousness of their working positions could foment the feeling of the historically situated unjust rather than the universal a-historic ideal of the traditional intellectual. Thus, replacing the paternalistic idea of intervention from a distance and from above, with intervention from within.

Such a realization could potentially lead to a revisiting of our own identity; instead of understanding ourselves in the liminal position

within the dominant class, academics could identify themselves as exploited knowledge workers (Fuchs 2010) belonging to the post-industrial working class: the multitude (Hardt and Negri 2004). Such a feeling and understanding of the subaltern may originate by what Henry Giroux (2002) describes as the task of taking a critical stance toward our own practice and the practice of others to engage in debate and inquiry. Accordingly, as suggested earlier, the practice of the intellectual inside academia must be materialized rather than idealized.

The organic intellectual operating in present times has several tasks. First of all, as a laborer, he/she needs to work harder than the traditional and orthodox intellectual in order to be at the forefront of theoretical work, because as I tried to show, theory matters as much as practice. Second, the intellectual should mediate consciousness and action. As Cloud (2006) suggests, the intellectual must function as the bridge between the inside and the outside of the university walls, a living mediation between the theoretical consciousness and the empirical grounded reality. Third, the organic intellectual could function similarly to what Gramsci defined as 'integral journalism' not only 'intended to satisfy the immediate needs of its public, but intended to create and develop those needs in order to extend gradually the area of interests of its public' (quoted in Buttigieg 1992, 24).

The public of academicians are certainly students, but also colleagues and neighbors. Therefore, the organic intellectual can operate more directly outside its most immediate sphere of action, namely academia, to mediate transformative praxis of political organization and social movements. Such a function, first of all, implies socializing his/her own cultural capital in order to provide people outside academia with the theoretical and conceptual framework to better understand reality beyond its surface. In fact, our liminal position, far away from the world of production (as traditionally understood) but still retaining the logic of accumulation of (cultural) capital does not simply cripple us, but also allows us to examine such a reality from an inappropriate distance, therefore allowing the moment of estrangement that Bertholt Brecht considered necessary for any ideological critique.

Conclusions

As James Aune points out:

One disturbing feature of academic discussions of ideology or hegemony is a lack of reflexivity. In other words, there is an implicit but unjustified assumption that the academic has somehow escaped the hegemonic processes that influence every-one else. For this reason, critical self-reflection is what I think is first of all needed to understand our won environ-

ment, what Bourdieu calls the 'skhole' (the school) (Aune 2011, 429).

In relation to that, the goal of the paper was to show how praxis inside academia is, on the one hand, conditioned by a political economy of academic production and publication. On the other hand, critique is also conditional upon the embracement of a kind of critique that fuses ideas and action together in the agency of the subject in making history. Rejecting both an idealist understanding of the intellectual and anti-humanist conceptualization of critique, the paper advanced a realist ontology and epistemology of praxis founded on Gramsci's thought.

First of all, by concretely engaging with the academic field and with the forces at play in such field, one can reconcile the intellectual and manual labor of academics. Bourdieu's analysis helped to uncover university intellectuals as subjects in need, operating in a regime of scarcity and asymmetrical power relations. In such an environment, the possibility for critique and intervention are materially constrained by conservative forces of reproduction of the field.

At the same time, critique and activism are also limited by what can and cannot be envisioned in intellectuals' field of thought. In this sense, I have shown how the literary fortune of specific critical approach-

es produce an anti-human ecology, a theoretical environment in which subjects are not guaranteed a collective sharing of the same meanings nor an affectivity of their action. As a consequence, the efforts directed towards purposeful actions get lost in an ever-changing forest of symbols. Such a perspective seems to explain why, when trying to make sense of OWS, many thinkers tend to frame the agency of the movement in ways that hardly touch the material and coercive reproductive system of the society which are dissolved into a discursive cosmology of signs.

Consequently, I argue that a radically holistic understanding of hegemony, dialectically reconciling dualisms, such as symbolic and material, consent and coercion and state and civil society, could potentially provide an adequate vision for radical social change. Such a change can be promoted both outside academia, as belonging to a political group organized in the civil society to form an historic bloc against the state, and as organic intellectuals who do not fight to preserve their cultural capital, but actually try to socialize it in the classroom by bridging abstract consciousness with an empirical one. Unfortunately, I am aware that this is not necessarily a recipe for a successful practice, but at least it offers a critical one: so let's try, let's fail, let's fail again and let's fail better!

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