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INTERVIEW WITH DARIO AZZELLINI (JOHANNES KEPLER UNIVERSITY, AUSTRIA) AND MARINA SITRIN (CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, USA)

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In September 2011, activists occupied Zuccotti Park in Manhattan, initiating a new wave of struggle against capitalism and unprecedented recession. The impact of the Occupy movement has been noticeable also outside the USA, affecting forms of protests, actions, and language. The echo of powerful keywords and catchphrases such as "we are the 99 percent," "eat the rich," and "occupy" itself, have inspired protests worldwide, offering new symbols and paradygms to expose long-time unbalanced power relations that have been covered and made unspeakable or invisible by decades of propaganda and biased media representations.

We interview two scholars and activists who authored the pamphlet Occupying Language*, issued in 2012 by a publishing house originated within Occupy (Zuccotti Park Press). Their book is mostly devoted to analyzing practices of resistance and of creation of directly democratic spaces in Latin America, in order to show how the USA, Europe, and Latin America are walking towards similar goals using similar strategies and devices.*

The authors, though writing in English, mention and analyze keywords in the languages spoken where protests are being carried out nowadays, showing how slogans are being borrowed and shared. In Athens, for example, banners can be seen reading "Ya Basta!;" the same slogan has been translated in Arabic ("Kefaya!," meaning "enough!," was shouted in Tahrir Square).

Dario Azzellini is a political scientist and associate professor of Sociology at Johannes Kepler University in Linz, Austria. He is also a writer and filmmaker. He holds a PhD in political science from Goethe University in Frankfurt (Germany) and a PhD in sociology from Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (Mexico). His research and writing focuses on social transformation, people's power, self-administration, workers control, democracy and extensive case studies in Latin America. He served as Associate Editor for The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present *(Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) and was primary editor for the sections about Latin America, the Spanish Caribbean, and the new left in Italy.*

Marina Sitrin is lawyer, activist, and visiting scholar at the Center for Place, Culture and Politics (CUNY Graduate Center). She has a JD from CUNY Law School and a PhD in Global Sociology from Stony Brook University. Her research focuses on forms of autonomous self organization, horizontal social relationships, affective politics and everyday revolutions.

Their recent publications include:

Azzellini, Dario. Partizipation, Arbeiterkontrolle und die Commune. Bewegungen und soziale Transformation am Beispiel Venezuela*. Hamburg: VSA, 2010.*

Azzellini, Dario, and Immanuel Ness, eds. Ours to Master and to Own. Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present. *London: Haymarket, 2011.*

Azzellini, Dario, and Marina Sitrin. They Can't Represent Us: Reinventing Democracy From Greece to Occupy. *Brooklyn: Verso, 2014.*

---. Occupying Language. Brooklyn: Zuccotti Park Press, 2012.

Sitrin, Marina. Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina*. Oakland: AK Press, 2006.*

---. Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina*. London: Zed Books, 2012.*

ANNA BELLADELLI: One of the contributions to the present issue (Adami and Fabbro) deals with the media representations of Occupy-related events in Italy and abroad. The authors claim that there is a tendency in Italian mainstream newspapers to construe a positive representation of radical actions taking place abroad (i.e. Greece, Turkey, and the USA) and a negative one of occupations and of other acts of resistance taking place in Italy (i.e. NO TAV, a protest movement fighting against high-speed rail in Val di Susa, at the border to France). Have you noticed similar attitudes in the media coverage of Occupy and of today's protests in general?

DARIO AZZELLINI: It's absolutely the same in Germany. For example, German media insisted on stressing that

Occupy events in the USA were interesting and positive, whereas the people involved in Occupy protests in Germany were a bunch of young, disadapted kids, sometimes even homeless, that were doing things without ideas. So the German media claimed that Occupy in the USA was very different from the one in Germany, whereas I think that the problem was that they were even too similar: German activists were reproducing the same events that were launched in the USA without trying to develop something of their own. Another tendency I've noticed about German media regards protests in Spain: during the whole first year, they insisted that the Spanish protest was a youth movement, and it's absolutely not. And this came from conservative media but also from liberal ones – liberals usually love revolutions as long as they're far away from where they live.

MARINA SITRIN: I noticed that some US mainstream media were much more friendly with protests in Egypt and Spain – although perhaps this is really overstating it, because mainstream media in the USA are never "friendly" to protests. For instance, the *New York Times* created this online map where you could click on cities and neighborhoods and see what activists were creating for their communities (libraries, childcare, etc.). But as soon as the Occupy movement emerged in the USA, media started to worry – is it violent? is it illegal? – and they cast the same events (demonstrations, occupation of public space, etc.) in a totally different way. Even the alternativa media aren't friendly – they rather critique the fact that the Occupy movement doesn't have specific demands, or they try to push Occupy into a more traditional type of protest.

DA: There's one more reflection to be made. European media in general still hold a sense of cultural superiority compared to the USA. So every protest against the US establishment somehow proves to them that the American system is rotten, as if ours weren't. The system in Europe has adopted almost everything from there, so it's a false sense of superiority – but it may play a role in why the media here like US protests so much, especially when they are against financial craziness, turbo capitalism, and all those features that Europeans think belong to someone else.

AB: Another linguistic aspect that deserves attention is the semantic and pragmatic difference between choosing to use *occupy* as a foreign borrowing (in non-English speaking countries), and choosing to use *occupazione, ocupación* and so on. The latter words seem to have maintained their denotations of defiance, radicalism, even illegality. *Occupy* ___, by contrast, has undergone some sort of weakening, both semantic and pragmatic: in many contexts, such as social networks, the exhortation *Occupy* ___*!* has come to mean "be active in fighting ___," "show agreement to fight ___," or even simply "show empathy for those who are fighting ___." Could you sketch out the genesis of the word *occupy* and your viewpoint on its evolution in time?

MS: I was in the initial group that was meeting in the summer before we occupied Zuccotti Park. As you know, there was the call by Adbusters.com to occupy Wall Street. We were meeting under the name of New York City General Assembly, and we were trying to create a directly democratic space and organize assemblies. We simply used the expression "occupy Wall Street" that had been proposed by Adbusters, but we had no idea that it was gonna take off the way it did. The meaning of *occupy* has changed, at least in the United States. Hundreds of cities have had various forms of occupation of space, but since every time some space is occupied it is then transformed into something else, creating alternatives and prefiguring desirable relationships, then the verb "occupy" has come to mean "recuperate," "take back" instead of "take over." It's more about occupying our history, occupying meaning, and transforming it.

Why did the rest of the world decide to use the word "occupy?" Maybe because the USA received so much attention for what we were doing – it was something new in the USA, a consistent movement with consistent events with not so many people organizing. It was catchy.

DA: I too believe it was about the media's attention. And it was catchy. The same can be said about the "99 percent." If we go deeper in the analysis and use statistics we should say "95 percent," but if you want to be heard you need to be catchy. But there's another dimension that we might want to consider. By using the same slogan all over the world, people feel that it's the same struggle, it's the same causes, the same forms of organization, it's rejecting the same injustice and holding the same people accountable for what's happening. I think that recognizing each other in the struggle worked a lot, and it still works. You have people in Brazil showing "Occupy Gezi" signs, and people in Turkey greeting Brazil at the same time. You have livestream connections between Tahir Square and Greece, or Greece and Spain, or Spain and Italy. That's why we can now call it a new global movement, because it takes similar forms in different countries and people recognize each other as similar in the struggle.

MS: A last thing. Not many groups called themselves "Occupy." Turkey and Brazil certainly did, but in other countries it was the media that labeled them, as well as they labeled the Spanish protestors as "indignados" – activists in Spain never referred to themselves as such, but rather as "15-M" or "Democracia real ya." So I'm not sure that framing the Occupy movement as a global movement is completely right, although politically speaking it certainly works.

Concerning the spectrum of meanings that this word has when used in other countries, I can say that the same holds for the United States. There are still radical groups that are carrying on occupations in the initial sense of *occupy*, but you can also see signs and events such as "Occupy the elections." There is criticism about it: for instance, people who are

involved in the Occupy movement in New York are trying to get people to not use the word so carelessly. So the word is no longer that important, and we should rather focus on the relationships and the organization.

AB: Perhaps the most powerful slogan created by OWS is "We are the 99 percent." Could you comment on that?

MS: The impact of the "99 percent" slogan in the USA was incredible and cannot be underestimated. People had stopped talking about class politics in the States for decades. It was a country where the union system was completely bureaucratic and class was not an issue. When it came to blaming someone for financial or economic difficulties, people would just blame themselves, because in such an individualistic society if you lose your job it's your fault. People would be evicted from their houses because they couldn't pay for their rent or for their mortgage, but given to the culture of shame that is so deep in the USA, nobody was using the word *eviction*: you simply noticed that someone was moving out and you never got to know why. So the "99 percent" slogan shifted the conversation from "What did I do wrong?" to "Where is the crisis really coming from?" So people stopped thinking that there was something wrong with them and started to realize that they werepart of something bigger and it was not their fault. Now neighbors talk with each other, and in many areas they mutually protect their houses when someone is being evicted or foreclosed on, organizing physical blockades to defend people's homes from the police – something that has not happened since the Depression in the 1930s. So the "99 percent" as a concept for class struggle has played a tremendous role in the creation of dignity.

This slogan started with the Tumblr message "We are the 99 per cent" in the summer of 2011. People started to add messages such as "I am the 99 per cent – I am being foreclosed on," or "I am the 99 per cent – I have student loans," and so on. Later on, this initial tendency to use "*I am* 99 per cent" – which partly meant "Poor me, I have issues, I'm the 99 per cent" – faded away, and a sense of pride and power took off, when "*We are* 99 per cent" became more and more used.

AB: This is a photo I found online that I used in a seminar on the language of OWS. It raised quite an animated discussion with my Political Studies students, so I'd like to share it with you. As you can see, an African American woman on the right holds a handwritten poster listing the social and work groups that she allegedly thinks are the 99 percent. Next to more "expected" categories, such as students, nurses, or teachers, we find stock clerks, lawyers, and more surprisingly, police officers. Although analyzing the inclusion criteria of a single citizen would be useless, we can't deny that the notion of "99 percent" poses unprecedented questions. I don't think that, in the Sixties or Seventies, even the most naïve of protestors would have included the police in a list of those who are "on our side." What are your impressions?

MS: There's not absolute unity in the USA around Occupy at all, and one of the issues is about the role of police.

There were different relations with them. In New York City we had agreed that there would be no relationships with the police and no negotiations, but within Occupy-related events in the city there were people who sometimes prepared little tables with coffee and donuts for the police, thinking that if they were friendly maybe they would be less repressive. There was no consensus around these little gestures – the only consensus was around no negotiations and no direct contact with the police. There was a debate in the USA about the role of police, as well as in Spain, where you could see in the early days posters reading "Police are the 99 per cent." In the USA, considering the police on the side of protestors is absurd to most people, and not only on account of the history of protest. If you're a black man, your chances of being assaulted and killed by the police are incredibly high.

DA: I think that "99 percent" is more about who has political power and access to political power. About the poster, we could hypothesize that it was written in the early days of Occupy. When I arrived in the States two weeks after the protests had started, I was astonished at seeing people participating who had never participated in anything in their life, who had never had a chance to speak up and be heard. For many, it was the first time when they could take part in a decision that went beyond shopping. But individualism was still so strong that people would make their own poster at home and bring it to demonstrations, whereas in Europe you see more frequently small groups arriving with banners and carrying them together.

MS: In the USA and in Europe, because so many people were new and had never done anything political in the street, and because so many people who joined the protest were not black, or latino, or poor, many had never had unpleasant encounters with the police in their life. But as Occupy actions spread city after city, state after state, the level of repression and brutality that people met changed their opinion about the police. So I wonder whether the woman who wrote the above sign would still write it after being pepper sprayed, or hit with a rubber bullet, or sexually harassed.

AB: Another famous poster that circulated a lot online was the following May Day poster. (It is also central to this special issue of *Iperstoria* because the quotation from Herman Melville is analyzed by Jonathan Greenberg's contribution. But now I'd like to focus on "No work. No school. No banking. No housework. No shopping." If we read this poster using critical linguistics, we could say that there's a creative use of language that questions the notion of protest, but also the notion of work. Two pieces of information are not mentioned but taken for granted: that May 1st is traditionally a rest day for workers, and that a strike is conventionally a form of demonstration carried out by workers. The way in which language in the poster is devised and visually displayed, however, doesn't simply make a list of actions that strikers must refrain from; it creates a silent sillogism according to which *school*, *banking*, *housework*, and *shopping* are all forms of *work*. To what extent is Occupy contributing to a redefinition of work?

MS: It's perhaps the beginning of a rethinking of what work is, especially about housework, maybe also about shopping. Now for example Silvia Federici is becoming much more known within the United States. She did a talk about the Wages for Housework campaign around the time of the Occupy Wall Street events, and many people attended. Generally speaking, there has been a shift in the conversation: the USA are now talking about the idea of precarity, which hasn't been brought up for a long time. But the most important thing about May Day posters is that they brought back the idea of May Day! The idea of general strike was about striking business as we knew it, trying to change how we related to each other: even if you don't have a job, there's a way you can participate in May Day, by not shopping, by not engaging with the system in any way for one day.

DA: New York did a lot of blocking of banks and of different areas of the city, similar actions were carried out as well

in Europe around the Euromayday mobilizations. There are two primary needs: one is the necessity to redefine work, and the other is the necessity to redefine the struggle, because if we don't work in the traditional way, we cannot strike in the traditional way either, and we need to come up with new ways to molest capitalist business as usual. If I'm a precarious worker, I can't just go and strike because I won't be effective. I have to intervene to make my voice heard.

AB: My last question is about the language of the Academia about Occupy. I was quite surprised at reading Noam Chomsky's *Occupy* book, published by Zuccotti Park Press, that gathers some of the speeches and interviews that Chomsky delivered after the rise of the Occupy movement. Although the argumentations and the topics raised by him seem to be congruous with Occupy, the language used by him and by his interlocutors (some of which explicitly claim to be Occupy activists) seems outdated. Here is an example:

> **Professor Chomsky, the Occupy movement is in its second phase. Three of *our* main goals are to: 1) occupy the mainstream and transition from the tents and into the hearts and the minds of *the masses*; 2) block the repression of the movement by protecting the right of the 99 percent's freedom of assembly and right to speak without being violently attacked; and 3) end corporate personhood. (Chomsky 69, my emphasis)**

How can conflicting representations of the people such as *the masses* and *the 99 percent* coexist? Chomsky himself seems to want to bridge the gap by saying that thanks to Occupy people may "see that they are not alone, that this is all of us" (71). But then he adds that "it's necessary to *get out to where people live*. That means not just sending a message [but rather creating] communities, real functioning communities of mutual support, democratic interchange, care for one another, and so on" (73, my emphasis); he also argues that "*you* might go into a neighborhood and find that *their* concerns may be as simple as a traffic light on the street where kids cross to go to school" (75, my emphasis).

It seems like the linguistic legacy of thinkers, academics, and activists of the 20th century still imbues the language of current movements. The output sounds quite far from today's consciousness. But very often this obsolete language is the one that is being replicated, especially at university level, because it's used by University-affiliated writers who have more direct access to publishing, lecturing, and teaching. Since you are both activists and scholars, I'd like to know your opinions with regard to these issues.

MS: In the university, to say there is confusion is being generous with the term. But I don't think there's any confusion in this case. I think that University professors still like the idea of teaching "those who do not know." But you can notice the same attitude also in more traditional left groups in the USA, or in many NGOs: their language is always based on the idea that "We need to teach them," and questions arise such as "How do we bring more people," "How do we recruit more people," rather than using language as a form of invitation and of opening of space, which is I think what Occupy is more about. So linguistically speaking there's still a lot of struggle, because many traditional activists have incredibly good intentions but they still hold on to hierarchical structures of organization.

DA: When we read most of the academic work that has been written about these new movements, we will find untrue representations of it as the "Facebook revolution," or the "social media revolution," which means denying the core of the whole discussion. Downgrading and degrading it to some phenomenon that was generated by technological improvement is a limitation. All revolution and transformation movements use the media that are available in their times: for example, the Izvestia newspaper played a crucial role in the Russian Revolution, but nobody has ever defined it as a "newspaper revolution." I've been reading a text about the M-15 events with my students, and since it was written by a political scientist, the main argumentation was the central role of sociologists and political scientists in the creation of the M-15 movement. Another example comes from Venezuela, where I lived for a long time. Most academics who were left-winged in the Eighties and Nineties, as soon as poor people started to organize and speak for themselves, and no longer needed academics to speak to them and for them, became right-winged, because they lost their role as the voice of the marginalized. One last limitation created by academic representations of new movements is their labeling them as "social movements." We disagree with confining them to the social sphere, whereas such movements are also economical and political. Emancipation means necessarily to overcome the bourgeois division of spheres – the social, economic and political sphere as autonomous spheres with an own and separated logic. That's why we often define them as "popular movements," because this term includes all of the above dimensions.

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CEDAM, 2010, authored with Roberta Facchinetti).

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