Panayota Gounari[*]

"THE *POLIS* IS ONESELF:" THE "OCCUPY" MOVEMENT AS A SITE OF PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

We have come to Wall Street as refugees from this native dreamland, seeking asylum in the actual. That is what we seek to occupy. We seek to rediscover and reclaim the world (…) What do we want from Wall Street? Nothing, because it has nothing to offer us. We wouldn't be here if Wall Street fed off itself; we are here because it is feeding off everyone. It is sustaining the phantoms and ghosts we have always known and whose significance we now understand. We have come here to vanish those ghosts; to assert our real selves and lives; to build genuine relationships with each other and the world; and to remind ourselves that another path is possible. If the phantoms of Wall Street are confused by our presence in their dream, so much the better. It is time that the unreal be exposed for what it is. (Communiqué 1)

On September 2011, amidst the heat generated in the Middle East with the Arab Spring in Tunisia, followed by Egypt and other countries in the area, and protests across many European countries against the neoliberal assail, the "Tahrir-moment" seemed to have arrived for Americans. According to the now urban legend *Adbusters*, a Canadian non-profit activist magazine, gave the starting signal with hashtag #OCCUPYWALLSTREET on Twitter and asked whether America was ready for an "anti-globalization" movement. However, long before New York's "Tahrir moment" a group of artists, including local organizers, writers, students and activists from New York, as well as from Egypt, Spain, Japan and Greece who had taken part in other uprisings, had started gathering on the fourth floor of 16 Beaver Street, near Wall Street to discuss whether another world was possible (Kroll).

2011 witnessed massive layoffs at all government levels, revenues were reduced and there were local and government concessions in terms of labor rights and wages while military budget accounted for 40% of the national government spending; a year "of slash and burn" all around (Aronowitz 57). When some five thousand people stormed Liberty Square in Manhattan's Financial District and after being repelled by NYPD, they set up a camp in Zuccotti Park that morning of September 17th, "something ha[d] been opened up, a kind of space nobody knew existed (…) Something just got kind of unclogged" (Gitlin 14) and Occupy Wall Street would be etched in the imaginary of American people. As a movement, it spread to over one hundred cities across the United States usually with encampments in city squares.

The "99% percent" slogan entered public debate to represent claims on simply a better life, accountability for big corporations, protest against joblessness; it was directed as much at government as at big banks and big investors. The movement had an anti-capitalist nature, it was leaderless, with a horizontal organization, held open public general assemblies and attracted people from all walks of life, age range, race, gender, and ethnicity. OWS managed to "change the parameters of the public debate and revolutionized our political vocabulary" (Roos) in many ways. In this article I want to explore the ways in which OWS opened a new public sphere that served as a site of public pedagogy. What I am interested in are the Occupy movement's pedagogical characteristics as they have shaped the public discourse, as well as the ways lessons from Occupy can serve as pedagogies and be reinvented in school curricula. In other words, I am attempting to make the political pedagogical and the pedagogical political.

1. Occupy as public space & revitalizing the political

"Wall Street" as a financial site represents a material and symbolic space where money moves around. Hyped up by Hollywood, it resonates with images of wealth, greed and gluttony, lack of moral rules, and a distorted notion of success. It is interesting to note that the site where OWS protesters initially demonstrated was soon closed down and fenced at the request of the private company that owned the space. The occupation of such a highly "charged" place for corporate America certainly marked the first symbolic victory of the movement in reclaiming a central NYC space as a public sphere. The "geography" of OWS palpably illustrates the tension between the private and the public. On the one hand the conservative, corporate, individualistic sphere with a focus on success, self-interest, individual responsibility, wealth and power through exclusion; and on the other, the active, collective action focusing on the common interest and social responsibility, and making claims to the right to work, the right to public health and education. The concept of public sphere is very important here; Giroux argues that lack of public spheres "reveals the degree to which culture has become a commodity to be consumed and produced as part of the logic of reification rather than in the interest of enlightenment and self-determination" (Giroux 1997, 236).

The Occupy movement came at a time when politics appeared to be somewhat removed from our civic lives and the practices of human societies, or it had become so vilified in the public discourse, that it seemed almost heretic for anyone to try to advocate its importance—not to mention its revitalization—and to reclaim a terrain for its existence and evolvement. In market societies, like the United States, we have been witnessing the emergence of what Carl Boggs calls "antipolitics," a retreat from civic engagement, a deepening feeling of powerlessness, the embrace of a culture of cynicism that builds a wall of apathy and indifference to the "*koina,*" that is, the affairs of the "*polis,*" the city in ancient Greek. Similarly, David Croteau observes that "the reigning political mood in America is a combination of disenchantment, cynicism, and alienation" (Boggs 12). How have people who were involved in Occupy moved from a position of inertia, apathy and disenchantment to a subjectivity position, where they intervened in important and meaningful ways in the public sphere? How did they manage to connect their private troubles with public issues? In other words, what marks the passage to a subjectivity position in a context like the one taking shape in OWS?

When politics breaks out from its narrow party line definition and becomes redefined as the "ongoing critique of reality" (Bauman 2002, 56), one needs to look into the reality in question to find answers to the question above. In the context of this paper I will not venture into exploring the reasons behind Occupy, but I will rather ask the critical questions behind it. In the case of Occupy, clearly those involved engaged to one degree or another in questioning their reality, its discourses and its practices and this is the first step towards re-politicizing politics and assuming a sense of agency. Politics here should be understood as a project in the making, unfinished and open, a "mechanism of change, not of preservation or conservation." Politics is an "explicit and lucid activity that concerns the instauration of desirable institutions and democracy as the regime of explicit and lucid self-institution as far as is possible, of the social institutions that depend on explicit collective activity" (Bauman 2002, 84). Politics constitutes a unique public sphere, a type of *agora* in which people come together, interact, make decisions, forge citizen bonds, carry out the imperatives of social change, and ultimately search for the good society insofar as "justice belongs to the polis" (Boggs 7). The colorful river of people who have participated in the multiple Occupy movements in New York City and elsewhere were in fact engaging in "doing politics." Encampments served as contemporary agoras where people shared the microphone, debated, shared space and ideas and became involved in the affairs of the polis. On the other side of the fence, corporate America and conservatives thrived on the depoliticization of politics promoting a conservative agenda that made participation in collective decisionmaking irrelevant, shrinking the public sphere, reinforcing individuality over the collective, and creating an illusion of participation in affairs that have already been decided by others. From this discussion, it becomes clear that public spheres are highly political and should aim at human self-governance and at freeing people from the logic of the market. Occupy movements as public spheres were a major blow to depoliticization to the degree that they have challenged anti-democratic, authoritarian and conservative narratives, that included a frontal assault on labor rights, social services and welfare provisions, and produced a people-generated counter theory that will be discussed in the last section of this paper.

Public spheres always beg the question of human agency, since they are par excellence sites for its exercise. In this context the question of ethical responsibility emerges to the degree that individuals concerned with public affairs move to a subject position where they become actors in the construction of their own realities. Occupy has served as a public space inhabited by politics and where various types of agency produced and/or suppressed.

2. Occupy as Public Pedagogy

The most exciting aspect of the Occupy movement is the construction of the linkages that are taking place all over. If they can be sustained and expanded, Occupy can lead to dedicated efforts to set society on a more humane course. (Chomsky 47)

The Occupy movement can be understood and analyzed as a site of public pedagogy to the degree that it engulfed struggles over meaning and knowledge, the creation of new meanings/significations, the contestation and challenge of representations, and the confrontation with a particular set of corporate, conservative knowledges; it pushed people to make the linkages Noam Chomsky is talking about in the above quote, to bridge their private lives with public issues. These linkages were deeply pedagogical in that they have possibly shaped new types of collective consciousness and ways to intervene in the world. In the same way that "the dominant cultural apparatuses represent a powerful form of public pedagogy that normalizes existing relations of power, infantilizes its viewers, substitutes entertainment and spectacle over critical investigative reporting, and invests in spectacles of violence as its primary mode of entertainment in order to attract advertising revenue" (Giroux 2013, 8), Occupy disrupts this normalization, questions the dominant cultural apparatuses, enables participants to assume agency and makes bare the power relations.Henry Giroux (2012) has made a valid point on the pedagogical role of the movement as "a force for critical reason, social responsibility and civic education." He stresses that protesters "need to become border crossers, willing to embrace a language of critique and possibility that makes visible the urgency of talking about politics and agency not in the idiom set by gated communities and anti-public intellectuals, but through the discourse of civic courage and social responsibility." Occupy as public pedagogy can play a important role in reinventing pedagogical practices that would keep critical thought alive as well as serve as an example of what it takes to engage protesters/learners involved in a project that addresses their real life conditions and ultimately aims at making their lives better, as was one of the simple "claims" of occupiers. Giroux is worth quoting at length here:

Such a notion of democratic public life is engaged in both questioning itself and preventing that questioning from ever stalling or being declared finished. It provides the formative culture that enables young people to break the continuity of common sense; come to terms with their own power as critical agents; be critical of the authority that speaks to them; translate private considerations into public issues; and assume the responsibility of what it means not only to be governed, but learning how to govern. (Giroux 2012)

Occupy as public pedagogy reveals "the regulatory and emancipatory relationship among culture, power, and politics" (Giroux 2013, 64). In this section I am identifying three "themes" that connect Occupy with notions of pedagogy: agency/collective action, autonomy, and a new theory of political literacy.

1.1 *Agency*

Earlier in this paper, I made the case that questioning ideologies, institutions, and discursive practices is a first step towards reinventing politics, revealing subjective positions that would enable people to assume ethical responsibility and to act upon it. Occupiers did just that. They inhabited new subjectivity positions through a process of direct democracy, inclusion, open dialogue and debate, and horizontal structures of organization. In my discussion on agency I will use political philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis's intense and lively metaphor of the labyrinth to describe how one engages with a project (in his case philosophical) from the starting point of questioning. Castoriadis pictures the human being at the entrance of a Labyrinth (or possibly its center?), where all one can see are dark intertwining galleries. This is the point where one is confronted with the dilemmas to follow that gallery or the other, to pick different paths and it may well be that one may find him/herself wandering the same trail again and again without knowing where this or that gallery leads. To think, Castoriadis claims, does not mean to get out of the labyrinth, neither does it mean to replace the uncertainty of shadows with the clearly defined outlines of things, the dimming candlelight with the shiny sunlight. Rather, it means to decide to enter the labyrinth, or better, to make this "construct" look like a labyrinth; It means to get lost in the labyrinth's paths that exist only because we are digging them up, as we circle around at the end of an impasse only to realize at some point that this whirling has started cracking the internal walls. Such is the work of an engaged human being, an active citizen, to whirl around issues exhaustively in discursive and material ways until the walls of our solid, monolithic, palpable worlds start to crack, to fracture. The Occupy movement was an instance of such a fissure, a moment when people decided to enter and explored the Labyrinth while at the same time giving shape to its trails and galleries. There was no blueprint, since politics is a process and not a finished product. One's insertion into the labyrinth is intimately tied to one's ontological vocation to be curious – a curiosity that requires according to Freire, an

educational praxis [that] while avoiding the trap of puritanical moralism [bought priesthood], cannot avoid the task of becoming clear witness to decency and purity. (…) As men and women inserted in and formed by socio-historical context of relations, we become capable of comparing, evaluating, intervening, deciding, taking new directions, and thereby constituting ourselves as ethical beings. It is in our becoming that we constitute our being so. (38-9).

Occupy was a people-powered, leaderless movement (without this implying that there were no leading figures, but they were always in the plural and in no position of absolute authority). Discussions were conducted in a dialogical way, resonating with a Freirean dialogue; a dialogue that presupposes that all participants enter the discussion on equal terms and not as experts, that there is mutual trust and that participants are willing to question their own assumptions. To participate in these open discussions or general assemblies would mean that people would cease to be observers, they became part of the situation they observed and that situation was not simply the here and now of the Occupation but also, and most importantly, the people's lived realities, experiences of oppression despair, frustration and quest for a vision. The kind of agency I am talking about is not Pollyannaish but rather an organic construct, grounded on the dialectics between the social and the individual, the material conditions and the social aspirations, it is a blend of knowledge and participation. In this sense it is deeply pedagogical.

1.2 *Autonomy*

In delineating the boundaries of a political project around the Occupy movement, there is an inherent pedagogical dimension that has broken out of the walls of formal education to challenge public knowledges and assumptions in a different space. It was an example of citizen education that gave valuable, substantive content to the "public space. This *paideia*,*"* according to Castoriadis, "is not primarily a matter of books and academic credits. First and foremost, it involves becoming conscious that the *polis* is also oneself and that its fate also depends upon one's mind, behavior and decisions; in other words, it is participation in political life" (Castoriadis 1991, 113). People are the *polis*, they are an integral part and constitutive material, they shape the affairs of the polis and this cannot come without "putting into place these spaces, spheres, and modes of education that enable people to realize that in a real democracy power has to be responsive to the needs, hopes, and desires of its citizens and other inhabitants around the globe" (Giroux 2009).

In this context, Occupy exemplifies an instance of autonomy, as the self-institution of the movement as opposed to heteronomy, something that is being imposed by somebody else from the outside. Autonomy in politics assumes that people create their own institutions. Collective autonomy requires individual autonomy. Autonomous individuals can only form an autonomous society (Castoriadis 1988c). Although direct democracy as witnessed in Occupy general assemblies may appear to be unruly, given the requirement of total individual autonomy (everyone is entitled to an opinion that they can articulate freely and openly), democracy is the regime "founded explicitly upon doxa, opinion, the confrontation of opinions, the formation of a common opinion. The refutation of another's opinions is more than permitted and legitimate there; it is the very breath of public life" (1991, 7).When the Pandora box opens, "with the questioning of given institutions, democracy becomes anew a movement of self-institution, that is a new type of regime, in the full sense of the word" (Castoriadis 2000, 277-8). As such, the instauration of democracy can come only from an immense movement of the population of the world, and it can only be conceived of as extending over an entire historical period. For, such a movement—which goes far beyond everything habitually thought of as "political movement" – will not come about unless it also challenges all instituted significations, the norms and values that dominate the present system and are consubstantial with it. It will come into existence only as a radical transformation in what people consider as important and unimportant, as valid and invalid—to put it briefly, as a profound psychical and anthropological transformation, with the parallel creation of new forms of living and new significations in all domains. No matter how unruly, cumbersome, and difficult it may seem, the such struggle points to, according to Freire, "the unfinishedness of the human condition and… our consciousness of this unfinished state. Being unfinished and therefore historical, conscious of our unfinishedness, we are necessarily ethical because we have to decide. Take options… We can only be ethical (…) if we are able to be unethical" (Freire 100-1).

1.3 *Occupy, Solidarity and a theory of Political Literacy*

Yesterday, one of the speakers at the labor rally said: "We found each other." That sentiment captures the beauty of what is being created here. A wide-open space (as well as an idea so big it can't be contained by any space) for all the people who want a better world to find each other. We are so grateful. If there is one thing I know, it is that the 1% loves a crisis. When people are panicked and desperate and no one seems to know what to do, that is the ideal time to push through their wish list of pro-corporate policies: privatizing education and social security, slashing public services, getting rid of the last constraints on corporate power. Amidst the economic crisis, this is happening the world over.

And there is only one thing that can block this tactic, and fortunately, it's a very big thing: the 99%. And that 99% is taking to the streets from Madison to Madrid to say "No. We will not pay for." (Klein 2012, 105-6)

In the context of the Occupy movement, people "found each other" in a deeply alienated and reified capitalist society. In a society where the power elites have been using fear to reify and contain people so that they no longer create or decide about the social order they live in, they are instead objects of a pregiven social order. Klein (2008) maintains that business interests and power elites squash popular resistance and dissent through symbolic and material fear and violence ranging from "catastrophic" discourses in the media to very real torture and repression. Being in a state of shock as a country, says Klein, means losing your narrative, being unable to understand where you are in space and time. The state of shock is easy to exploit because people become vulnerable and confused. They are robbed of their vital tools for understanding themselves and their position in the sociopolitical context. The Occupy movement was an instance of collective "re-narrativisation" since it has mobilized people to create a new language "that connects the struggle over individual and collective agency to "the visible lines of possibility (Giroux 2012); it has given us a

political grammar and a radical vocabulary with which to reinvent our critique of global capitalism and from which to begin constructing our own revolutionary alternative to bankocracy. Occupy taught millions of people the language of autonomy and horizontalism, of direct action and prefigurative politics, of consensus decision-making and participation — and, most important of all, it helped reinvigorate that long-lost hope that there *is* an alternative, that another world *is* possible. (Roos)

The creation of public spaces and the development of new vocabularies that fracture are requisites for a "counter-education" that must become a project for educators, cultural workers, artists, and activists, among others. That is people, who dare to imagine a different word– a counter-education where citizens engage in the unlearning of anti-democratic practices while calling "for a new imaginary creation whose signification cannot be compared with anything similar in the past, a creation that would put at the center of human life significations other than the increase of production and consumption, that would set different goals that people would consider worth struggling for" (Castoriadis 2000, 129).

Occupy as an instance of a political project revealed that people are engaged when they are aware of their lived material conditions in a way that encompasses personal experience to include those social and political structures that relegate them to poverty, joblessness, lack of social provisions and so forth. They are engaged when the project at hand bears relevance to their own lives and they are the authors of their own histories as these develop now in a new public sphere where possibility is an open-ended concept. They are engaged when they can connect their lived experiences as individual signification with larger actions such as the occupation of a public space, the picket to a CEO's mansion or the occupation of a bank branch. More importantly they are engaged when they become the authors of a theory, creating a new project of political literacy. An important aspect of Occupy that should concern educators is the production of a wealth of texts in social media, blogs, magazines, and different kinds of media where people involved and observers documented the movement through their own eyes, "crafting a point of view from many different sources" (Chomsky 2012, 50). Those involved moved from a stage of political illiteracy that according to Freire is an ingenuous perception of humanity and its relationship with the world and a naïve outlook on social reality to a stage of political literacy where humans are not fatalistically determined and where they participate critically in the transformation of their reality (what Freire calls "conscientization"). This was also largely done through a dialogical process that all participants entered equally thanks to the leaderlessness of the movement. Knowledge and thinking around Occupy further expanded into academic scholarship and new trends and directions in research giving birth to different theories around Occupy in particular and social movements in general as Occupy in the United States articulated with many similar occupations from Puerta del Sol to Tahrir to Syntagma Square. In these sites

movements have attempted to open up new modes and sites of learning while enabling new forms of collective resistance. Resistance in this instance is not limited to sectarian forms of identity politics, but functions more like a network of struggles that affirms particular issues and also provide a common ground in which various groups can develop alliances and link specific interests to broader democratic projects, strategies, and tactics. (Giroux 2013, 65)

In my discussion, I haven't brought in any of the critiques, since my goal is to reveal those aspects of Occupy that can be capitalized on pedagogically and further expanded. Even though Occupy was an instance that crystallized some of the most promising ideas and practices of political intervention, it should still be seen as a learning moment for political movements, activist groups, and people concerned with the affairs of the polis. It is also important to explore the ways in which opposition can become resistance, that is, acquire a real political content, develop concrete structures, organization tactics and strategies that would make it a viable political project. Stanley Aronowitz proposes that to do that, "a bold step would be to engage the prevailing patterns of cultural consumption that not only flatten the popular capacity for critical thought, but set an agenda for public debate that so limits the conversation that some issues are never addressed. […] What the Left and the social movements lack now is their collective ability to imagine alternatives to the current set-up and to find ways to disseminate their positions by direct action as well as propaganda" (75).

Works Cited

Bauman, Zygmunt. *In Search of Politics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

---. *Society Under Siege*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.

Boggs, Carl. *The End of Politics*. New York: Guilford Press, 2000.

Castoriadis, C. 1998a. *The Rationality of Capitalism* [Η «Ορθολογικότητα» τουΚαπιταλισμού]. Athens: Ypsilon Publications.

---. "Contre le Conformisme Generalisé: Stopper la Montée de l'Insignificance." <u>*Le Monde Diplomatique*</u> (August 1998b) : 22-3.

---. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998d.

---. *The Rise of Insignificance*. [ΗΆνοδοςτηςΑσημαντότητας]. Athens: Ypsilon Publications, 2000.

Chomsky, Noam. *Occupy*. Brooklyn: Zuccotti Park Press, 2012.

Occupy. "Communique 1." *Tidal Magazine* 1 (December 2011): 3.

Edmonds, Lynn. "Is Greece in Shock? Naomi Klein tells Enet how her bestseller The Shock Doctrine relates to Greece." *Eleytherotypia Online* April 26 2013. http://www.enetenglish.gr/?i=news.en.article&id=766 Last visited 25/3/2014.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of Freedom*. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.

Giroux, Henry. *Public Spaces, Private Lives.* Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.

---. "Cultural Studies, Public Pedagogy and the Responsibility of Intellectuals." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1.1 (March 2004): 59–79.

---. "Educating Obama," *CounterPunch*, February 2009 6-8. Last visited 21/3/2014.

---. "Gated Intellectuals and Ignorance in Political Life: Toward a Borderless Pedagogy in the Occupy Movement," *Truthout* 20 March 2012. Last visited 21/03/2014.

---. "The Occupy Movement Meets the Suicidal State: Neoliberalism and the Punishing of Dissent." *Situations* 5.1 (2013): 7-34.

Gitlin, Todd. *Occupy Nation*. New York: Harper Collins, 2012.

Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine*. New York: Henry Holt, 2008.

---. "The Most Important Thing in the World." *Dreaming in Public: Building the Occupy Movement*. Ed. Amy Schrager Lang and Daniel Lang/Levitsky. Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Ltd, 2012.

Kroll, Andy. "How the Occupy Movement Really Started." *Mother Jones* 17 October 2011. Last visited 21/03/2014.

Roos, Jerome. "How Occupy Reinvented the Language of Democracy." *Roarmag* 17 September 2013. Last visited 21/03/2014.

---

* *Panayota Gounari (*Questo indirizzo email è protetto dagli spambots. E' necessario abilitare JavaScript per vederlo.">*Panagiota.Gounari@umb.edu) is Associate Professor in the Department of Applied Linguistics at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research interests focus on language and literacy, linguistic hegemony, language and the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), and language policy.*