

Occupying London: Post-Politics or Politics Proper?

Samuel Burgum

“Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse... it has been incorporated into the common sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world”

— (Harvey 2005:3)

“Any naïve leftist explanation that the current financial and economic crisis necessarily opens up a space for the radical left is thus without doubt dangerously short-sighted”

— (Žižek 2009:17)

The “crunch, crash and crisis” of 2007/8 was hailed by many as the inevitable and long-deserved end of neoliberal capitalism as an ideological regime which had risen from the margins of economic theory to becoming the go-to framework for national and global governance (Fukuyama 1992). Critics reveled in their “I told you so” moment against the arrogance of economists and politicians who thought they had found the perfect politico-economic model (personified by Gordon Brown’s infamous statement that there would be “no return to boom and bust” (Guardian 2008). Indeed, where neoliberalism had had 1970’s stagflation, social unrest around the globe (the so-called “Arab Spring, European Summer and American Fall” of 2011) suggested this could now be the left’s long-awaited moment to capitalize upon an economic crisis. However, it seemed that what such premature celebrations of “the return of history” (Badiou 2012) nevertheless missed, was that neoliberalism had become more than simply an economic theory proposed by an eclectic group of economists, politicians and investors; it was now socially and culturally entrenched, with a widespread popular appeal to the material aspirations of a post-Fordist society. Under the auspices of “market freedom” leading to greater “individual liberty,” neoliberalism was now wider than something that “they” – brokers; bankers; politicians; ideologues; economists; the 1% – were pushing down people’s throats. Instead, it was now a normative and hegemonic framework, consented to via everyday actions and capitalizing upon anti-establishment feeling. In other words, in the aftermath of the 2007/8 crisis, neoliberalism was well-positioned to impose an ideological limit on the very possibility of what counts as rational in contemporary society.

We can define neoliberalism as a particularly acute form of capitalism which involves an explicit and unashamed shift in the legitimation of state power: from one that is legitimized “democratically” through elections to something which is legitimized so long as it supports and takes on free market principles (see Foucault 2008). As such, any state action or decision is considered to be legitimate insofar as it ‘steps in’ (e.g. bailouts) or ‘steps out’ (i.e. deregulates) in line with the needs of the market. Principles of competition, meritocracy, measurement, efficiency, outsourcing and expertise – as well as a selective reframing of values such as individual freedom, enjoyment and utilitarian happiness – therefore become a normative framework that provide a measure for the “rationality” of means and ends. In other words, neoliberalism is “a form of governance that seeks to inject marketized principles of competition into all aspects of society and culture” (Gane 2014:1) and which, in doing so, polices society into this framework, by informing the rationality of everyday actions, decisions, interactions, discourses and appearances.

In addition, neoliberalism should also be seen as an order which is based upon the endlessness of a “continuous present.” In accordance with market logic, speculation on the future becomes necessary and subject to more and

more vigorous calculation as part of an attempt to mitigate risks, possibilities and contingencies. As such, the future is channeled, measured and limited by the current ideological framework (Swyngedouw 2011; Lazzarato 2014), constraining the ability to perceive a “rational” future which is radically different from the one in which we now find ourselves and creating a situation where “utopias of alternative worlds have been exorcised by the utopia in power” (Žižek 2009:77). It is the contention of this paper, that such a foreclosure of imagination and possibility (through a normative framework of neoliberal common sense) also excludes possibilities for resistance. This situation – which was referred to by a number of theorists before the financial crisis as “post-politics” – aims to capture the “foreclosure of the possibility of politics and the tacit embrace of global capitalism” (Dean 2006:115) and, I argue, has a number of direct effects on post-crash power and resistance.

Because neoliberalism had become the only “rational, reasonable, sensible and pragmatic” approach to legitimate authority, it is suggested that the crisis was not, in fact, an opening up of radical possibility. Instead, neoliberalism was simply able to reassert itself as the “only logical thing to do” and (on the whole) was able to do so without “having to physically compel obedience but to rely on a common sense of what is legitimate and who deserved to be obeyed” (Davies 2014:58). Every debate and clash on alternatives going forward had to take place within what were posited as “apolitical co-ordinates” of reason, or risk being positioned as “impossible non-sense.” Or, as Ranciere might put it, the (supposedly apolitical) distribution of the “sensible” acted as a “police order”: “a specific regime for identifying and reflecting... a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships (which presupposed a certain idea of thought’s effectivity)” (Ranciere 2004:10; also see Burgum & A.N.Onymous, 2014). In other words, processes of identifying, reflecting, articulating, becoming visible, ways of thinking, doing and making were bound into a policed regime of legitimacy and a presupposed exclusion of some possibilities by designating them “non-sensible.”

I begin this article with a review of post-crash literature on neoliberalism and by demonstrating how the “post-political” foreclosure of possibility was not in fact challenged by the financial crisis (as many expected), but instead counter-intuitively reaffirmed as a hegemonic framework. I then move onto the more philosophical argument that resistance is perhaps always-already complicit in structures of power in order to challenge the idea of “prefiguration” within social movements and social movement theory. Finally, this will then lead me onto considering how the attempts to resist the reassertion of neoliberalism may also have been limited by such a foreclosure of possibility. In particular, I will be focusing on the post-crash movement of Occupy (in) London to demonstrate this, suggesting that the limits on what “counts” as rational grievance rendered the movement somewhat complicit with prevailing power structures. To conclude, I will then critically consider the symbolic efficacy of the term “post-politics” itself, considering Jodi Dean’s critique of the term as leading to a certain marginality and melancholia on the left.

Foreclosure: Neoliberalism as Common Sense

When Hayek argued in *The Road to Serfdom* (1979) that there was a fundamental contradiction between “liberty” and the “state,” he did so by blurring the distinctions between left and right, snidely remarking that “few are ready to recognize that the rise of Fascism and Nazism was not a reaction against the socialist trends of the preceding period, but a necessary outcome of those tendencies” (1979: 3). Such a blurring, however, not only appears to be a profound abuse of reason, but also distributes the terms of debate through a false choice: “You must choose! Either you are pro-freedom and therefore pro-market; or you are pro-state and one-step away from totalitarianism!” Indeed, even the very use of the word “totalitarianism” suggests an attempt to close down alternatives, lumping together any collective attempt at radicality into the same vague oppressive category (see Žižek 2008a). As such, we can understand Hayek’s a priori cynicism of the state – beautifully illustrated by Peck’s (2010) description of the economist sat on a roof at Cambridge University looking out for Nazi Bombers during World War II – as having a precise ideological effect by foreclosing possibility.

This pre-exclusion of the state is therefore central to the driving concerns of neoliberal theory and can be discerned as early on as the CIA-backed coups in South America and the US-government funding of Chicago School scholarships for Chilean students; through the IMF and World Bank blackmail of countries in need through the “structural adjustment” conditions attached to financial aid; and right up to the exploitation of disasters in order to take advantage of “blank slates” in more stubborn places from New Orleans to Baghdad to Sri Lanka (Klein 2008). However, this slow and steady rise of neoliberalism should in no way be taken as a suggestion that it is a complete

and coherent ideology. In fact, it could be argued that its internal contradictions (such as the extent to which the state should intervene to sustain market competition) could be seen as precisely what has allowed it such a powerful shape-shifting ability that can react to contingencies in different locales. What's more, while neoliberalism isn't therefore universal, it is argued that places which might be considered "outside" of this regime are nevertheless rendered exceptions that prove the rule, marginalized and excluded by international institutions and then taken as evidence of simply "what happens" when you don't adhere to the rationality of free market principles.

What is foreclosed, in other words, is the possibility that the state could ever be something "else" (because such centralized institutions are "necessarily" precluded as the beginning of the slippery road to serfdom). The neoliberal market, on the other hand, is posited as something that humanity has fortuitously and accidentally happened upon (without any inherent biases) and therefore the only thing that can co-ordinate resources without the oppression of centralized power (Hayek, 1948). As such, things like inequality can be positively encouraged as evidence of working competition and meritocracy (as Friedman (1980) famously put it: "a society that puts equality before freedom will get neither...a society that puts freedom before equality will get a high degree of both"); yet maintain a wide and popular appeal because it promises individual freedom (within the rules of private property) to pursue self-desires with impunity. [1]

When the crisis happened, however, it was supposed by many that the contradictions in neoliberal theory were (finally) going to be revealed and that neoliberalism was no longer going to be able to account for a system of such extreme inequality in which 1% of people owned 50% of the world's wealth (Oxfam 2015). Indeed, as Andrew Gamble argued – whilst admitting that "little has apparently changed" (2014:17) – the "crisis" should be seen a political opportunity to shift the normative frame and in which "radically different outcomes were at stake" (2014:29). He therefore joined the chorus that argued that "as the crisis has unfolded, it has also begun to cause an upheaval in previously settled views of the world: in our assumptions and expectations" (2014:27).

However, I find this attempt to simultaneously analyze and frame the crisis as the "opening up" of political opportunity problematic. By attempting to frame the crisis as an opportunity for radical change, is there not a risk of overlooking a critical analysis of a potential "post-political" foreclosure of possibility which has in fact limited such opportunities? Indeed, as others have argued, what the crisis could actually be said to demonstrate is the Lazarus-like ability of neoliberalism to reassert itself as the normative measure of reason within society. For Peck, for instance, the crisis was yet another example of neoliberalism's zombie-like ability to "fail forward" in that "manifest inadequacies have – so far anyway – repeatedly animated further rounds of neoliberal interventions" (2010:6). And for Mirowski, the crisis was simply wasted by the left, as "unaccountably the political right had emerged from the tumult stronger, unapologetic, and even less restrained in its rapacity and credulity that prior to the crash" (2013:1-2). In other words, rather than an instance of radical opportunity, the crisis actually reaffirmed that there was a complete lack of a "viable" alternative, and "far from constituting the end of capitalism, the bank bail-outs were a massive reassertion of the capitalist realist insistence that there is no alternative" (Fisher 2009:78).

Indeed, it was ultimately the viability of radical change that was being reasserted and foreclosed. All politics which followed the crisis seemed to take place within a "distribution of the sensible" policed by neoliberal capitalism, recognizing arguments either as a legitimate and authentic voice (i.e. neoliberal) or designating them as illegitimate "noise" and "non-sense" (i.e. an irrational and unreasonable model of governance). Subsequently, radical alternatives – from the idea of communism (Žižek & Douzinas, 2010); to anarchism (Graeber, 2011); to Keynesianism (Galbraith, 2008); to right-wing nationalism (Matsa, 2013) – were not necessarily "unviable" in themselves; but were designated as such by the normative dominance of neoliberalism. As such, to appear as sensible was to make concessions with "the current financialized regime of accumulation...embedded in the very ontology of our everyday lives to such a large extent that even those social groups that are potentially able to challenge its legitimacy cannot do it without challenging their very existence" (Lilley & Papadopoulos, 2014: 972).

It is precisely the ability for this regime to present itself as post-political pragmatic realism which gives it a hegemonic symbolic efficacy as "ideology par excellence" (Žižek, 2008b: xiv). Indeed, perhaps "the most likely reason the doctrine that precipitated the crisis has evaded responsibility and the renunciation indefinitely postponed is that neoliberalism as worldview has sunk its roots deep into everyday life, almost to the point of passing as the 'ideology of no ideology'" (Mirowski 2013:28). In other words, rather than a confrontation between frameworks of morality, reason and rationality, the "post-political" consensus that business must get back to "normal" as soon as possible, meant that financial proponents could simply respond "to calls for a radical overhaul of their management by calling them unviable and unrealistic" (Worth, 2013: 49).

Complicity: Power and Resistance

Despite this context of ideological dominance, it is nevertheless the contention of many social movement theorists that resistance is somehow able to create “interstitial spaces” (Bassett 2014) that hold the potential to act outside the dominance of prevailing power structures. For instance, it has been argued that social movements “constitute processes through which people identify such features of injustice, oppression, or stigma collectively and articulate alternative understandings to change social relations” (Cox 2014:957) by developing “an alternative ‘local rationality’...from its immediate context towards a more generalizable form of movement knowledge which constitutes an alternative way of operating not only to hegemonic ‘common sense’ but also to the expert-led knowledge” (Cox 2014:965). Whilst I wouldn’t want to argue that such utopian space was completely impossible, it seems that such claims nevertheless seem to overlook the complicity that resistance might have in contemporary power relations. Indeed, I find the suggestion that activists have a unique ability to embody counter-hegemonic frameworks of rationality outside of prevailing norms as quite problematic and, in this section, it is my contention that such a view on resistance suffers from an over-simplification of both power and resistance.

As Foucault has argued, power is not simply “possessed” by some elite group, but something which is re-constituted and re-asserted structurally via everyday distributions. As such, while power might most often be “channeled” through those in a position of authority, it should nevertheless be recognized not as something “they” uniquely hold, but which “proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space” (Foucault 1991:141). Put differently, power is something which “disciplines” by ensuring that “each individual has his own place; and each place its individual” (Foucault 1991:143). It is therefore a positive and constituting force rather than something which is necessarily negative and oppressive. It is that which designates the subject and establishes them in their position – characterizing, assessing, hierarchizing, ranking, sorting and categorizing individuals – and rendering them “functional” by establishing relations between them. [2]

As such, power is something “exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege,’ acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic position – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated” (Foucault 1991:141). According to Foucault, then, those who appear subjected to power can paradoxically be part of its smooth functioning, insofar as they “play the role” assigned to them. It is this counter-intuitive dynamic which Foucault is attempting to capture with his infamous reference to Bentham’s design for the panopticon. The prisoners arranged around the guard tower in their individual cells are distributed as individualized and visible bodies. Crucially, however, they cannot see into the guard tower, and therefore there does not need to be surveillance in order for power to operate, as the prisoners inscribe upon themselves their distribution. As such, the very design of the panopticon materializes ideals of asceticism (self-discipline), efficiency (minimal number of guards for large number of prisoners), and utilitarianism (rendering the prisoners “useful” by putting them to work in their own self-discipline). The panopticon is therefore inherently economizing and scientific, characterizing liberal themes and making them powerful through the distribution self-subjecting of bodies.

It is surely this logic which leads Foucault to his well-known assertion in *History of Sexuality* that “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” (1998:95). Elaborating further in an interview, he adds that, really, this statement is a tautology: “I am simply saying: as soon as there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance...we are never trapped by power, we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy” (Foucault 1989:153). In other words, power and resistance are co-constituting, but while the categories through which powerful institutions and ideas hold their power are potentially coercive, they also bear the possibility of constituting new resistance.

Judith Butler, for instance, has read Foucault as understanding power in two ways. Firstly, as problematic for resistance, in that when “we think we have found a point of opposition to domination...that very point of opposition is the instrument through which domination works, and...we have unwittingly enforced the power of domination through our participation in its opposition” (Butler 2000:28). Secondly, however, it is nevertheless the case that “if subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the term of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself” (Butler 2006:127). In neither case, however, is resistance seen as a space “external” or “outside” of power, but is instead continually and reflexively rethought as something “internal” and complicit with such structures.

It is subsequently not productive, I argue, to fetishize resistance as something which is uniquely able to establish space outside of power relations. Indeed, such uncritical romanticism risks overlooking certain structural coercions and limitations that render resistance foreclosed and complicit, with accounts of “interstitial” or “prefigurative” space relying on a fetishization of movements rather than constructive critique. Instead, as I have attempted to demonstrate through Foucault and Butler, “there is no outside” (Foucault 1991:301) and therefore resistance must be thought of in its complexity as something complicit and implicated in power from the start.

Case Study: Occupy (in) London

This section aims to illustrate the ways in which resistance appears to be foreclosed by the (reasserted) power structures of post-crash society with specific reference to Occupy (in) London. [3] My research with this movement has suggested (at least) three different ways in which political possibilities were limited and rendered complicit through the form this particular activism took, and I will now briefly explore individualization, authenticity and cynicism in turn.

Appearing to mobilize spontaneously through a number of pre-existing activist networks that utilized social media – and inspired by the movements immediately preceding them in New York, Athens, Madrid, Cairo and Tunis – Occupy (in) London set up camp outside St Paul’s Cathedral in October 2011 (after a failed attempt to occupy the stock exchange next door). Over the following months, this initial campsite diversified from “Occupy LSX” into a series of other occupations, most notably: Finsbury Square, The Bank of Ideas, Leyton Marsh and Mile End, as well as a number of working groups who met at a Quaker Friends House in Euston. However, these divisions were not only a useful division of labor, but also reflected a certain desire to escape the media scrutiny, police pressure, occasional public abuse and in-fighting at St Pauls. As the founding campsite, it seemed that there was more at stake in democratic discussion and, as such, the diversity of stakeholders involved were perhaps less willing to relent on any already-held beliefs because of the site’s symbolic significance. Fractures and divisions therefore began to appear and became spatialized throughout the city as people coalesced into splinter groups of like-minded individuals.

As such, Occupy (in) London went from something which claimed to be pre-figuring a more inclusive, horizontal, equal and democratic society (“the 99%”) towards a more fractured and divided movement. Rather than working out disagreements and grievances, many instead became exasperated with the General Assembly (GA) and simply formed their own niches and cliques (leading many, confusingly, to reject the name “Occupy London,” particularly after the activists evicted from St Pauls began using this universal signifier – and its social capital – for their own particular activism). As such, it is argued that these divisions appeared somewhat complicit with the style and distribution of what “counts” as legitimate political grievances in contemporary society, one in which “political struggle proper is transformed into the cultural struggle for the recognition of marginal identities and the tolerance of differences” (Žižek 2008c:263). Rather than a collective solidarity through directly democratic discussion, each fragmented interest instead seemed to become individualized around particular groups.

Firstly, however, this critique of individualization should not be seen as something which is in any way easy to overcome. For many, the retreat into such identity groups was actually an understandable reaction to the structural inequalities which were (inadvertently) re-established within the “horizontal” space of the General Assembly. A certain “tyranny of structurelessness” (see Freeman 2013 for an all-too-familiar description of this phenomenon) seemed to establish itself, meaning that (despite the attempt or desire to create a horizontal and directly democratic space) “words uttered by some seem to count so much more than words uttered by others” (Hewlett 2007:97) and many exclusionary structures (including patriarchy, racism, ableism, classism) were unwillingly re-created.

Secondly, this critique of identity politics should also not be seen as positing some grievances as somehow “lesser” than some more “fundamental” anti-capitalist struggle. Indeed, while identity politics is problematic because it “does not in fact repoliticize capitalism, because the very notion and form of the political within which it operates is grounded in the depoliticization of the economy” (Žižek 2000:98), it should be recognized that this is just as much a problem for anti-capitalist politics itself. Indeed, anti-capitalist identities can be shown to be at least as susceptible to the complicity of an individualized politics (if not more so in that they deny their complicity even more fervently).

It is argued that one way we can see this complicity of anti-capitalist identities with the distribution of the sensible is through an overriding concern with the pursuit of authenticity. While, on the one hand, the pedigree of contemporary anti-capitalism can perhaps be traced back to May ’68 as a shared mythical point of origin and heritage

(particularly apparent in the post-crash movements re-use of the “we are all German Jews” slogan from ’68 into others: “we are all Tahir,” “we are the 99%”); May ’68 could also be seen the beginning of a new spirit of capitalism that precisely feeds into contemporary neoliberal ideas of individual freedom through the market (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). Indeed, such “cultural capitalism” – one in which “we primarily buy commodities neither on account of their utility nor as status symbols; we buy them to get the experience provided by them, we consume them in order to render our lives pleasurable and meaningful” (Žižek, 2009: 52) – indicates a potential foreclosure of resistance via a market precorporation (Fisher, 2009: 9) of “authentic rebellious experience.”

As such, the preoccupation with activism being “authentic” and uncorrupted by the market is, counter-intuitively, its very complicity with a capitalist culture that is continually searching for new, authentic, innovative, creative experiences to sell. Indeed, this is precisely “how capitalism, at the level of consumption, integrated the legacy of ’68, the critique of alienated consumption: authentic experiences matters” (Žižek, 2009: 54). The contemporary city, for example, can perhaps be characterized as endlessly seeking even-more novel opportunities for more “authentic” experiences as integral for urban growth. For instance, the radical potential of urban “happenings” – such as the occupation of space – risks becoming another unique selling point of the “creative city” (Florida, 2003; also see Peck, 2010), in which creativity that pushes the boundaries through risky innovation is actually encouraged as an integral characteristic of the city’s economic growth.

Another way in which this concern for authenticity suggests a foreclosure of political possibility is in the a priori dismissal of anything collective (including the state). Occupy’s libertarianism meant that anything which resembled an over-arching organisation – a political party or even a set of “rules” – was deemed necessarily oppressive of individual liberty and therefore corrupting the authenticity of their resistance. The crossover with neoliberal libertarianism (as exemplified by Hayek above) is palpable, as “every universality, every feature that cuts across the entire field...[is] rejected as oppressive” (Žižek, 2009: 44). Yet such universality might well be important for a more radical social change. As Butler argues (revising her earlier position): “I came to see the term [universality] has important strategic use precisely as a non-substantial and open-ended category...I came to understand how the assertion of universality can be proleptic and performative, conjuring a reality that does not yet exist, and holding out the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet been met” (2006: xviii). In other words, some universal appeal – like the 99% – might be seen as necessary for asserting possibilities outside the prevailing distribution of the sensible, yet an over-arching libertarian aversion to this not only prevents universals from becoming; but also renders resistance somewhat complicit with neoliberal anti-state logic.

Such cynicism towards universality leads us to our final theme. For Sloterdijk, cynicism can be characterized as an “enlightened false consciousness” which came about with the enlightenment project where seeking the “truth” behind appearances (aletheia) leads to a situation in which “a new form of realism bursts forth, a form that is driven by the fear of becoming deceived or overpowered...everything that appears to us could be a deceptive manoeuvre of an overpowering evil enemy” (Sloterdijk, 1987: 330). In other words, the surface becomes necessarily suspect, meaning that the “truth” of power can be hidden in its very exposure (like in the Emperor’s New Clothes) because power is always supposed to be hidden and secretive. Structural criticisms of power (for instance, how neoliberal capitalism was able to reassert its normativity after such an enormous crisis) are therefore foreclosed in favor of narratives of powerful agencies operating behind the scenes.

This theme can perhaps be demonstrated most succinctly within Occupy (in) London via the relative popularity of conspiracy theories. By conspiracy theory, I mean something with a particularly broad definition, as “a narrative that has been constructed in an attempt to explain an event or series of events to be the result of a group of people working in secret to a nefarious end” (Birchall, 2006: 34). Crucially, such a definition is not concerned with the “truth” of the theory’s content; but with the form which it takes (as such, I include as conspiracy theory anything from the use of undercover police officers; through the collaboration of politicians and business leaders (e.g. Bilderberg); right up to theories of worldwide networks (e.g. the Illuminati). In particular, therefore, what is important about the form of conspiracy theories is what they tell us about the contemporary relationship between resistance and power. Indeed, what they surely indicate is profound feelings of disillusionment, loss of agency and helplessness in a situation where certain decisions appear to be made in advance, post-politically limiting who may or may not be considered as a legitimate voice. Subsequently, conspiracy theories can be seen as directly linked to the grievances which underpin Occupy: such as the unaccountability and distance of an undemocratic and technocratic neoliberal state that seeks legitimacy in the market.

It seems that whenever protests “symbolically take to task the political leaders of the most powerful nation-states, this can go hand-in-hand – visually, rhetorically and analytically – with the depiction of world leaders and

their associates as secretive, undemocratic conspirators trying to take control of economic processes” (Schlembach, 2014: 18). But the consequence here is that power becomes something that “they” – the 1%, the powers that be, those who pull the strings – possess at “our” cost (rather than something which operates structurally through the normative distribution of the sensible). This forecloses the possibility of such a critique, either passing power off as the result of a few “bad apples” (a “cheap moralization” (Žižek, 2009) or some all-powerful, vague, far-reaching and insurmountable network.

Another problem is that resistance based on conspiracy theory risks becoming something which pre-marginalizes itself as “powerless.” While this marginality affords the activist a certain “election and...distinction” (Nietzsche, 2008: 31), such righteous indignation (ressentiment) nevertheless pre-positions their claim to radical change as a fringe claim which can easily be dismissed by the prevailing distribution as non-sensical, irrational and unreasonable. This fetishizing of a certain underdog position, as well as the parallel positing of powerful agencies that are impossible to overcome, means that resistance revels in its own powerlessness, presenting with symptoms of melancholia by being “attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even the failure of that idea – than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present” (Brown, 1999: 19). Indeed, by looking at themselves from the position they have been designated, such activists “end up reinforcing rather than subverting the master’s authority” (Dean, 2009: 84) and any “effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms” (Butler, 2006: 18).

I therefore argue that the individualization of politics; the preoccupation with authenticity; and the cynicism of power through conspiracy theories – which were widely manifested by a number of different people, albeit not everyone, within Occupy London – rendered the possibilities of post-crash resistance foreclosed and complicit with prevailing structures of power. The problem with making such a critique, however, is whether this in-itself has the adverse effect of adding to the distribution of the movement as “non-sense.” This distributing of Occupy, however, is not my intention, and I maintain that such a critical reflection on the movement remains necessary for radical politics going forwards.

Conclusion: Did Somebody Say Post-Politics?

Throughout this article I have been tentatively referring to the term “post-politics” to designate that which forecloses and renders complicit the possibilities of post-crash resistance. However, since the crisis, there has been a marked decrease in the use of this term by some of its former proponents (e.g. Žižek, 2012) as well as aforementioned suggestions that we are in fact witnesses to the “rebirth of history” (Badiou, 2012) that appear to reveal an optimism that post-politics was now “at an end.” Indeed, for Jodi Dean, the term has become somewhat defunct in an era of post-crash resistance, arguing that “Žižek’s description might have worked a decade or so ago, but not anymore... [with] massive uprisings, demonstrations, strikes, occupations, and revolutions” (Dean, 2012: 46). By way of conclusion, I therefore want to briefly discuss the efficacy of the concept “post-politics” (in particular with reference to the work of Dean) in order to ask whether it is a useful term for resistance or whether it counter-intuitively might also foreclose resistive possibility.

While Dean seemed happy to uncritically use the term “post-politics” before the crash (see Dean, 2006: 26), by 2009 she instead argues that the concept is now “childishly petulant” (2009: 12) and typical of “a retreat into cowardice, the retroactive determination of victory as defeat because of the left’s fundamental inability to accept responsibility for power and to undertake the difficult task of reinventing our modes of dreaming” (2009: 10). In other words, Dean stretches the critique of left melancholia to “post-politics” as a concept itself, suggesting that this idea is actually part of the problematic self-elected marginality of the left. Dean therefore somewhat “folds” the critique of post-politics back upon itself, arguing that the concept can be seen as a symptom of staying within the distribution of what “counts” as legitimate politics by pre-marginalizing radical alternatives.

Therefore, while Dean recognizes that “aspects of the diagnosis of de-politicization [are] well worth emphasizing” she nevertheless insists that “post-politics, de-politicization and de-democratization are inadequate to the task of theorizing this conjecture” (2009: 12), criticizing theorists like Ranciere for appearing to “write as if the disappearance of politics were possible, as if the evacuation of politics from the social were a characteristic of the current conjecture” (2009: 14). However, while Dean’s critique raises some important questions as to the usefulness of the concept, I nevertheless wish to maintain that “post-politics” has some radical potential. Not only, I argue, does

her critique seem to misrecognize the “politics” that the concept supposes to have been evacuated in contemporary society, but she also overlooks the symbolic potential of the term.

I see the term as potentially [4] useful precisely because it operates from a point of “non-sense.” The idea that we have moved “past” politics is provocative and dissonant, clashing with preconceived designations of what counts as “political.” In other words, the concept is at its most effective “when seen as a critique of the professionalization, cynicism, elitism and depoliticization which often characterizes parliamentary politics in advanced capitalist societies” (Hewlett 2007:112). I do not find it necessary, therefore, to get rid of the term “post-politics” to describe the current post-crash situation. It seems that the confusion and provocation that it causes is its use, upsetting the current distribution of what “counts” as politics and forcing a counter-intuitive concept into analysis. Post-politics, in other words, has a performative ability to “appear as nonsense” and therefore offers a critique which is not already incorporated into the distribution of the sensible.

While neoliberalism seems to install market principles into all areas of society (and has largely succeeded in dominating discourse by becoming the universal limit of what counts “sensible” politics), it is not simply something that is forced upon us from above but something hegemonic, something which is consented to through every actions and appeals to reason. It is therefore difficult to resist, because imagination is only considered rational within such limits (while anything else is deemed “non-sense”). Subsequently, despite many seeing the financial crisis as an opportunity to expand on such limits, I have argued on the contrary that resistance was tempered – foreclosed and rendered complicit – by the neoliberal distribution of the sensible. Occupy is an example of a movement that attempted to find a space outside of these rational limits but appeared unable to do so, inadvertently re-establishing divisions and hierarchies as well as appealing to prevailing logics of individualization, authenticity and conspiratorial power. What the theory of post-politics can potentially do, however, is create a critique that “makes nonsense appear” against its designation as such, and (while this may sound contrarian) it is suggested that this critique is nevertheless the starting point for reflecting upon contemporary resistance.

Endnotes

1. In particular, we can see this appeal to “reason” through the common use of sporting metaphors (Davies 2014:44) to justify competition. Here, the free market economy is compared to the logic of sport as a “fair” and “just” way of distributing outcomes, giving each “player” an “equal opportunity” to fulfil their potential on a “level playing field” (as well as the “unfairness” of a “referee” – the state – stepping in to control the game in any way). As the logic goes, in market as in sport: if one loses then it is their own fault; if they win then fair play.

2. As implied by this article, I find it useful to read Foucault and Butler alongside theorists such as Ranciere and Žižek (despite their insistence of radical differences). I don’t have space to go into these conflicts here, but see Armstrong (2008) for a good overview.

3. This is informed by ethnographic work conducted with Occupy (in) London since 2012, involving a large

number of unstructured interviews (with conversations guided by themes from critical literature) as well as a number of participant observations. The critique here captures neither the full diversity of the movement nor post-crash resistance beyond London, yet it is hoped that it might prove indicative of some problems faced by other movements in a context of the neoliberal foreclosure of resistance.

4. Having said all this, I do not find it necessary to “over-insist” on the term either. Indeed, I have found that using the term can, on occasion, lead conversation to focus more on its applicability rather than the problem it is intended to spark discussion around (the foreclosure of possibility in society). As such, insisting on the concept in the wrong context could actually foreclose deeper conversation.

References

- Armstrong, A. (2008) "Beyond resistance: a response to Žižek's critique of Foucault's subject of freedom", *Parrhesia* 5; 19-31.
- Badiou, A. (2012) *The Rebirth of History*. London: Verso.
- Bassett, K. (2014) "Ranciere, politics, and the Occupy movement", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32.
- Birchall, C. (2006) *Knowledge Goes Pop!* Oxford: Berg.
- Boltanski, L. & Chiapello, E. (2007) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Brown, W. (1999) "Resisting Left Melancholy", *Boundary 2*; 26.3; 19-27.
- Burgum, S. & A.N. Onymous (2014) "Samuel Burgum & A.N. Onymous on Ranciere & Occupy", TCS Blog, Annual Review.
- Butler, J. (2000) *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. London: Verso.
- Butler, J. (2006) *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.
- Cox, L. (2014) "Movements Making Knowledge: A New Wave of Inspiration for Sociology?" *Sociology* 48; 5; 954 – 971.
- Davies, W. (2014) *The Limits of Neoliberalism*. London: Sage.
- Dean, J. (2006) *Žižek's Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Dean, J. (2009) *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*. Durham: Duke.
- Dean, J. (2012) *The Communist Horizon*. London: Verso.
- Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Ropley: Zero.
- Florida, R. (2003) *The Rise of the Creative Class*. New York: Basic Books.
- Foucault, M. (1989) *Foucault Live*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Foucault, M. (1991) *Discipline and Punish*. London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1998) *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*. London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (2008) *Lectures on the Birth of Biopolitics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Freeman, J. (2013) "The Tyranny of Structurelessness", *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 41; 3 & 4; 231-246.
- Friedman, M. (1980) "Created Equal" PBS Free to Choose Television Series http://www.freetochoosemedia.org/broadcasts/freetochoose/detail_ftc1980_transcript.php?page=5 Accessed: 24th March 2015.
- Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Penguin.
- Galbraith, J. (2008) "The Collapse of Monetarism and the Irrelevance of the New Monetary Consensus", 25th Annual Milton Friedman Distinguished Lecture at Marietta College, Marietta, Ohio March 31, 2008.
- Gamble, A. (2014) *Crisis Without End?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gane, N. (2014) "Sociology and Neoliberalism: A Missing History", *Sociology* 48; 6; 1092-1106.
- Graeber, D. (2011) "Occupy Wall Street's Anarchist Roots" <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011112872835904508.html> Accessed: 24th March 2015.
- The Guardian (2008) "No Return to Boom and Bust: what Brown Said When He was Chancellor" <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2008/sep/11/gordonbrown.economy> Accessed: 24th March 2015.
- Hewlett, N. (2007) *Badiou, Balibar, Ranciere: Rethinking Emancipation*. London: Continuum.
- Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hayek, F. (1948) *Individualism and Economic Order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hayek, F. (1979) *The Road to Serfdom*. London: Routledge.
- Klein, N. (2008) *The Shock Doctrine*. London: Penguin.
- Lazzarato, M. (2014) in M. Charbonneau & M. Hansen (eds) "Debt, Neoliberalism and Crisis: Interview with Maurizio Lazzarato on the Indebted Condition" *Sociology* 48; 5; 1039 – 1047.
- Lilley, S. & Papadopoulos, D. (2014) "Material Returns: Cultures of Valuation, Biofinancialisation and the Autonomy of Politics", *Sociology* 48; 5; 972-988.
- Matsa, K. (2013) "Rise of Greek nationalist 'Golden Dawn' Party coincides with Greece's economic crisis", <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/02/rise-of-greek-nationalist-golden-dawn-party-coincides-with-greeces-economic-crisis/> Accessed: 24th March 2015.
- Mirowski, P. (2013) *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go To Waste*. London: Verso.
- Nietzsche, F. (2008) *The Genealogy of Morals*. London: Penguin.
- Oxfam (2015) "Richest 1% will own more than all the rest by 2016" <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2015-01-19/richest-1-will-own-more-all-rest-2016> Accessed: 24th March 2015.

- Peck, J. (2010) *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ranciere, J. (2010) *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Continuum.
- Schlembach, R (2014) *Against Old Europe*. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Sloterdijk, P. (1987) *The Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2011) *Designing the Post-Political City and the Insurgent Polis*. London: Bedford Press.
- Worth, O. (2013) *Resistance in the Age of Austerity* London: Zed Books.
- Žižek, S. (2000) *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2008a) *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2008b) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2008c) *The Ticklish Subject*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2009) *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2012) *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. & Douzinas, C. (2010) (eds.) *The Idea of Communism*. London: Verso.