The Occupy Movement and the Politics of Vulnerability

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Abstract
The Occupy Movement generated a significant amount of scholarly literature, most of which focused on the movement’s tactics or goals, or sought to explain its emergence. Nevertheless, we lack an explanation for the movement’s broad appeal and mass support. In this article we present original research on Occupy in New York City, Detroit and Berlin, which demonstrates that the movement’s heterogeneous participants coalesced around the concept of vulnerability. Vulnerability is the inability to adapt to shocks and stresses, and it inhibits social reproduction and prohibits social mobility. Rather than the wealth of elites per se, Occupy participants consistently expressed the feeling that current political economic system safeguards elites and increases the vulnerability of everyone else. We argue that the Occupy Movement reworked the relationship among a range of political struggles that were hitherto disconnected (i.e. ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements) and rendered them complementary through the politics of vulnerability.

Key Words:
Occupy Movement    social movements    vulnerability    critical theory
Introduction

Social movements are widely recognized as drivers of social change and transformation (Giddens, 1990; Habermas, 1992). For this reason progressive scholars heralded the Occupy Movement’s potential to reinvigorate liberal-democratic politics. The scholarly literature on Occupy can be grouped into three main categories. First, a number of scholars highlight Occupy’s politicization of public space and the act of occupation. Another stream of scholarship focuses on Occupy participants’ desires for ‘deeper’, more inclusive democratic systems. Finally, some scholars focus on the causes of Occupy and link its emergence to increased economic inequality and precariousness.

Existing scholarship provides a valuable body of concepts and frameworks, yet we lack an understanding of Occupy’s broad popular support. Although the oft repeated moniker that it represented ‘the 99%’ – i.e. the overwhelming majority of the population opposed to the super-wealthy one percent – may have been an exaggeration, it is undeniable that people from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds felt compelled to participate in occupations across the United States, Europe and beyond. This broad support is all the more remarkable when one considers that there was not a single policy or issue (e.g. opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq) around which participants mobilized. Our aim in this article is to offer an explanation for Occupy’s mass appeal at its zenith in late 2011 and early 2012, and we draw on original research in the United States and Europe (New York City, Detroit and Berlin, respectively).

We argue that Occupy participants shared a feeling of vulnerability, by which we mean the inability to adapt to shocks and stresses of various sorts (e.g. economic, social, environmental). Vulnerability can inhibit social reproduction and prohibit social mobility. Participants expressed an understanding that Occupy was transnational, but as Occupy evolved it became increasingly enmeshed with localized political struggles related to vulnerability. In other words, vulnerability gave Occupy coherence as it linked localized struggles with transnational politics in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. We draw on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001[1985]), and interpret vulnerability as a master signifier around which political discourse was restructured, allowing for a reconciliation of political struggles which were hitherto disconnected or even antagonistic (i.e. class and identity politics).

This article has five sections. In the next section we demonstrate that existing scholarship on the Occupy does not explain its broad base of support and the heterogeneity
among participants. In the third section we present the concept of vulnerability and explain how it has become the master signifier of the Occupy Movement. In the fourth section we present our empirical evidence. In the final section we conclude by exploring the significance of a politics centered around vulnerability, and its potential to lead to a progressive alternative future.

**Occupy Movement: Tactics, Goals and Emergence**

Occupy generated tremendous scholarly interest, and there was a general consensus that its emergence represented a departure from ‘politics-as-usual’. Most scholarship focused on Occupy’s tactics, goals and/or sought to explain its emergence. Each of these directions of inquiry provided useful insights, but they do not account for Occupy’s mass appeal and broad support.

Many scholars have focused on the tactics of Occupy, particularly the centrality and significance of the act of occupation. While Occupy is not the only movement to use the occupation of public space as a political tactic (see Castaneda, 2012; Kerton, 2012), it is unique in that the occupation of space is a means of resistance and it is also constitutive of the movement’s identity (see Hammond, 2013). David Harvey (2012) locates Occupy in a historical timeline of urban political contestations, and he focuses on the act of rebelling by seizing public spaces near centers of power (e.g. Wall Street). As a result, public spaces are converted into ‘political commons, a place for open discussion and debate over what the power is doing and how best to oppose its reach’ (Harvey, 2012, p. 161). Harvey claims that the act of occupation is the ultimate act of protest in the final instance, since ‘the collective power of bodies in public space is still the most effective instrument of opposition when all other means of access are blocked’ (Harvey, 2012, p.161-2). Similarly, Saskia Sassen (2011) argues that Occupy signals ‘the return of territory as one crucial stepping ground in social struggles’. Both Harvey and Sassen focus on the city as a strategic site of political contestation and resistance. For Harvey the rapid proliferation of urban occupations validates his longstanding claim that ‘there is something political in the city air struggling to be expressed’ (Harvey, 2012, p. 117). Sassen concurs, and argues that ‘new forms of political’ (Sassen, 2011) have emerged whose activities are centered in cities while cities simultaneously are constituted through these activities. Thus, for Sassen, cities are potential breeding grounds for a new politics of contestation by their very nature. Finally, a subset of this scholarship focused on the use of social media by Occupy participants, and the relationship between the occupation of cityspace and the use of virtual space. Indeed, as
Occupy became global in scale, cities as well as the net were strategic sites of expression and organization. As Uitermark and Nicholls (2012) explain, cities were linked under a broad umbrella of resistance by virtue of being occupied, and these linkages were cemented through extensive social media usage.

The second scholarly approach focuses on the goals of the Occupy Movement. There was a general consensus among progressive scholars that Occupy signaled a failure in liberal-democratic political systems. Joseph Stiglitz (2011) interprets Occupy as ‘an expression of frustration with the electoral process’ and ‘the conviction that even in a democracy, the electoral process will not set things right, at least not without strong pressure from the street’. Similarly Hardt and Negri (2011) interpret Occupy as an expression of ‘political grievances and aspirations’ and a ‘fight for real democracy’. Much of this scholarship focuses on the anti-elite rhetoric of Occupy. For example, Dorf (2012, p. 263) argues that at its core Occupy is ‘a democracy movement that aims to substitute empowered citizen decision making for elite rule’. This avenue of analysis generated a significant amount of scholarship in part because of the absence of an explicit set of demands presented by Occupy. Pickerill and Krinsky (2012, p. 283) point out that Occupy’s absence of demands can be interpreted as a refusal to ‘recognize the legitimacy of the state as an agent capable of or willing to implement policy’. Finally, Occupy encampments practiced participatory democratic politics but a number of scholars noted that exclusionary power structures were reproduced within the movement (Smith & Glidden, 2012; Juris, Ronayne, Shokooh-Valle, & Wengronowitz, 2012). For the purpose of this article, it is important to note that much of this literature emphasizes the diversity of Occupy participants.

The third main scholarly approach to Occupy focuses on the circumstances surrounding its emergence. In particular, scholarship focused on increased income inequality and precarity that were central themes in Occupy slogans and symbols. Erik Olin Wright (2012) argues that contemporary political and economic are in crisis because of a combination of rising inequality and economic slowdown. Indeed, for most Americans economic inequality is higher now than at any time in their memory and has left those at the bottom hopelessly precarious (Standing, 2009; Bauman, 2004). Judith Butler (2011) attributes Occupy’s eschewal of concrete demands to the comprehensive nature of precarity. For Butler, the demand for justice is at the core of Occupy, but the conceptualization of justice is comprehensive and exceeds singular issues that could be addressed by quick-fix legislation such as improving public education or providing healthcare. This leads Butler to
conclude that Occupy participants seek ‘a release from precarity’ and ‘a possibility of a livable life’ (Butler, 2011, p. 12).

Much of the scholarship cited above is not mutually exclusive – a person could be precarious, and occupy public space in an effort to achieve a more ‘deeply’ democratic society. However, existing scholarship does not account for the heterogeneity of Occupy participants and the broad support the movement enjoyed. While the 2008 financial crisis undoubtedly wrought havoc in the lives of many people and exacerbated precarity, many Occupy participants did not experience precarity directly yet they expressed a personal stake in the movement. In the remainder of this article we seek to explain Occupy’s mass appeal.

Politics of Vulnerability and the Occupy Movement

One is tempted to interpret Occupy as a vehicle through which its heterogeneous participants pursued a diverse set of political goals. Indeed, as the evidence we present below indicates, Occupy participants express a range of motivations for participating in Occupy, and they hail from diverse backgrounds. However, it would be a mistake to assume that Occupy was a collection of individual actors pursuing narrow self-interests. Instead, our research demonstrates that Occupy proved to be a durable platform upon which heterogeneous political actors coalesced around the concept of vulnerability.

Vulnerability can be understood as the inability to adapt to shocks and stresses of various sorts (e.g. economic, social, environmental). As a concept, vulnerability has its origins in the study of how risks and hazards affect complex human-environment systems (see Turner et al., 2003; Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner, 1994; Cutter, 1996). This scholarship examines the extent to which actors are able to adapt to shocks and stresses that typically originate outside of the human-environment coupling and throw the relationship into disequilibrium. Later the concept was broadened by development studies institutions and scholars who focused on non-natural – i.e. political and economic – shocks and stresses that disrupt livelihoods (DFID, 2000; Ellis, 2000; de Haan, 2000). Vulnerability can be reduced if risks and hazards are mitigated through the development of a new technology or the transformation of systems. In the case of ‘natural’ hazards (e.g. rising sea levels) people are typically forced to adapt, while socio-political vulnerability can be reduced by making changes to economic or political institutions.

We argue that Occupy participants are united by a feeling that it is increasingly difficult to adapt to shocks and stresses, and this ultimately inhibits social reproduction and
prohibits social mobility. A person need not have experienced financial ruin to feel vulnerable. For example, many American university graduates who face a lifetime of debt repayment and few job prospects are not destitute, yet the trappings of adulthood that came so easily to their parents seem unobtainable. Many of these recent graduates do not fit Guy Standing’s (2011) portrayal of the precariat who tend to be underpaid and overworked service-sector workers that oftentimes lack economic, social and cultural capital (see Savage et al., 2013). Nevertheless, due to circumstances beyond their control they are unable to expect a lifestyle similar to their parents. They are faced with the frightening proposition that the future they had come to imagine and expect is a mirage, and thus their social reproduction is jeopardized. Many Occupy participants expressed anxiety that lifestyles hitherto taken for granted are no longer realizable, partly because of economic and social insecurity wrought by the financial crisis, but also because vulnerability is hardwired into the contemporary political economy. So it is not the wealth per se of the so-called 1% that provokes ire among many Occupy participants, but a feeling that contemporary political and economic systems ensure the security and well-being of elites while everyone else is increasingly vulnerable.

Social reproduction requires a balanced constellation of economic stability and discernable social structures, whose institutions allow individuals and groups to determine how to employ their resources – i.e. economic, social and cultural capital (see Bourdieu, 1984). The post-war era in the United States and Europe provided a stable set of institutions that occasionally fostered social mobility and commonly ensured continuity (Aglietta, 1979; Piore & Sabel, 1984). People could typically expect a measure of security in their own lives, and that their children would have similar – and occasionally better – opportunities and futures. Many Occupy participants feel that these assumptions are increasingly unfounded, and while many people manage to avoid precarity, this discontinuity produces a sense of anxiety. For example, in Detroit the prospect of the collapse of General Motors threatened to impoverish pensioners and render autoworkers unemployed. For those with savings this would not have necessarily plunged them into precarity, but it would have necessitated an unexpected change in lifestyle. Furthermore, by threatening the future job prospects of children whose families have depended on the auto industry for their livelihood, General Motors’ seeming imminent collapse cast a dark shadow over inter-generational social reproduction.

Vulnerability crosses divisions of class, race, gender and nationality by jeopardizing individuals’ and groups’ (e.g. families, close-knit immigrant communities, classes) future access to the multidimensional constellations which sustain their individual life projects and
communities. This explains the heterogeneity of Occupy participants – while they may pursue wildly different life projects, they share a sense that their goals are increasingly unachievable. In some ways this is similar to Ulrich Beck’s (1992) theorization of the ethos of risk, whose distribution is, he argues, a major preoccupation in contemporary industrialized societies. Those affected by vulnerability, however, cannot necessarily identify specific risks for which they feel unprepared. As a result they cannot prepare for the future in the way that one prepares for an imminent disaster like a hurricane. For example, in order to ensure a middle-class lifestyle in retirement should a middle-aged office worker buy a house, invest in a pension scheme, or convert her savings into gold and hide it under her mattress? Should a manual laborer invest in education in an effort to respond to demands in the labor market in the next decade, take advantage of low interest rates to start a small business or relocate somewhere with low unemployment? The inability of many people to confidently answer these questions demonstrates that it is not the (re)distribution of risk that is a stake in the politics of vulnerability, but rather, it is a general feeling of being rendered powerless in the context of dynamic economic and social institutions.

Vulnerability served as the central theme around which a diverse range of groups cohered within the Occupy Movement. Although there are degrees of vulnerability and it is experienced differently by different individuals and groups, we argue that it was a ‘master signifier’ through which a range of diverse political positions found common cause and were rendered complementary. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001[1985]) explain that discourses are structured around a master signifier, which serves as a reference point for ‘empty’ or ‘floating’ signifiers whose precise meanings are undetermined until they are stitched into a discursive structure. These empty/floating signifiers acquire meaning in relation to other signifiers as they are quilted a discursive structure around a point de capiton. For example, signifiers such as ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ have different meanings if they are incorporated into a liberal-democratic or communist discourse (see Zizek, 2008). The process of giving meaning to empty signifiers, or anchoring floating signifiers, is highly contentious and is determined by real-world politics as groups seek to totalize a political vision and exert hegemony over competing discourses. Laclau and Mouffe (2001[1985]) explain that classical Marxist discourse erased competing political subjectivities by privileging the working class as the protagonist of historical transformation. They interpret the explosion of so-called identity politics and ‘new’ social movements in the 1960s as assertions of these identities that had been eclipsed by the hegemony enjoyed by the ‘proletariat’. Laclau and Mouffe (2001[1985], p. 159) recognize that instead of a privileged
protagonist such as the working class, there has been a “rapid diffusion of social conflictuality to more and more numerous relations.” Thus, the breakdown of the classical Marxian discourse of universal class struggle gave way to a proliferation of politics rooted in particular subjectivities and localities, and the relationship between old and new social movements was oftentimes portrayed by scholars as oppositional or even antagonistic (see Harvey 1990). The rapprochement between organized labor and identity politics was an explicit goal affirmed by many participants at the World Social Forums and episodic cooperation occurred spontaneously (e.g. at the anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999). Nevertheless, the duration and scope of cooperation among proponents of ‘old’ and ‘new’ movements in Occupy is unique. We argue that this rapprochement is due to the compelling nature of the concept of vulnerability, which serves to restructure the relationship among these diverse political actors – i.e. ‘old’ and ‘new’ movements – and ‘turns disorder into order, into harmony’ (Zizek, 2006, p.37) under the auspices of the Occupy Movement.

Occupy in Three Cities

In this section we present original research on Occupy in three cities; New York City, Detroit and Berlin. As the site of the first occupation and center of financial capital in the United States, New York City has a privileged symbolic position. Detroit is a peripheral city within the American Occupy Movement, but its occupation reveals how the politics of vulnerability were intertwined with the city’s long history of organized labor and civil rights struggles. Finally, as the capital of Germany whose economy is the largest in Europe, Occupy Berlin demonstrates the extent to which local struggles within the movement differ from one another, and nevertheless remain tethered to the concept of vulnerability. We conducted more than thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews with Occupy participants in these three locations between late 2011 and early 2012. We sought to interview Occupy participants from a broad range of social and economic backgrounds, and also include in our sample ‘core’ members (i.e. those who are involved in organizational matters of the movement on a regular basis) and casual participants (i.e. those who sympathize with the movement but whose participation in the occupations and other activities is sporadic). In most cases the interviews were conducted at the sites of occupation or other Occupy events, but in a few cases – particularly interviews with very active members who were too busy to speak with us during formal events – we interviewed participants in nearby cafes. At the time of this research, the media (particularly hostile news outlets) was emphasizing the acephalous nature of Occupy and its lack of demands. Our original research questions were focused on the
veracity of these assumptions, and we also hoped to learn more about the background of Occupy participants (i.e. whether they were active in other movements or if they had become politically active as a result of Occupy).

**Site I – New York City**

In July 2011 the magazine *Adbusters* proposed that on September 17, 2011, activists ‘flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street’ (*Adbusters*, 2011). In reference to its predecessors across the Atlantic, *Adbusters* called for ‘a fusion of Tahrir with the acampadas of Spain’ (*Adbusters*, 2011) and outlined how the Occupy Movement should unfold:

> [W]e talk to each other in various physical gatherings and virtual people's assemblies … we zero in on what our one demand will be, a demand that awakens the imagination and, if achieved, would propel us toward the radical democracy of the future … and then we go out and seize a square of singular symbolic significance and put our asses on the line to make it happen.

On September 17, 2011, hundreds of people answered the call and descended on southern Manhattan. There was originally confusion regarding where they should sleep – whether the police would allow them to pitch tents – but ultimately they established themselves in Zuccotti Park, a privately operated public park.

Events surrounding the occupation of Zuccotti Park are well known – General Assembly meetings were held, and working groups were formed to address various aspects of the occupation such as logistics, security, legal issues and medical care. After nearly two months of continuous occupation, heavily armed New York City Police violently expelled occupiers from Zuccotti Park on 15 November, and arrested approximately 200 protestors (*Barron & Moynihan*, 2011). New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg took responsibility for ordering the crackdown, claiming that the encampment posed a health and safety hazard (*Bloomberg*, 2011). Occupy participants regrouped in the weeks following the raid, and met on a daily basis – but did not stay overnight – in a nearby passage that afforded them with space to work and provided welcome respite from the elements. The working groups that had been formed in Zuccotti Park proved resilient while participation in the movement waned. On any given day hundreds of people would attend working group sessions – some would participate on a daily basis while others would stay for a short time and simply listen. It was here where we conducted interviews.
Interview respondents narrated how they became involved with Occupy. Many of them outlined the sentiments in the *Adbusters* call to action for their initial participation, and they described violence suffered at the hands of police as motivation for their continued involvement. One young man explained that ‘on a personal level I started to get involved because I happened to be here on the night the police raided the park and that was the turning point for me to start theoretically supporting it’. Thus, the collective experience of being assaulted by heavily armed police renewed a sense of solidarity and conviction among the demonstrators that was otherwise based on a shared sense of vulnerability. One African-American man in his mid-20s explained:

> Back in the day there was segregation so you would see a million black people and five white people or a million white people and five black people…but now we are building it on oneness and that’s why the government is shaken, in Washington now they are shaken.

According to this demonstrator, Occupy is inherently inclusive, and opposed to existing state institutions and market forces. He explained that it includes both whites and blacks because ‘[blacks] still get shot by cops, and the poor white people are living so poorly in the trailer parks’. Similarly, a middle-aged white man who identified himself as a manual laborer stated: ‘I am for the middle class and the poor although the middle class has become the poor. At present I’m living in a house that I am being evicted at’. This respondent considered himself part of an embattled ‘middle class’ that is increasingly vulnerable, but other respondents could be described as members of what Guy Standing (ibid.) calls the *precariat*. One young woman who fit this description explained her involvement with Occupy:

> I was living in the park for eight weeks. It was crazy because I came here without any intention of staying because I thought I was going back with a friend because she has obligations back in Massachusetts but I chose not to have a job and I stopped going to school earlier on in January and so I had no obligations and just decided to stay because I met so many people within two days that feel like family to me.

Another young man said he had returned from active duty military service in Iraq, and ‘it opened up my eyes to the whole system of corruption’. He explained that his motivation was to highlight the challenges faced by the ‘veterans community’, but acknowledged that
many communities faced similar problems. For one young graduate student Occupy was significant because rather than support a single community it fostered a new type of community:

The reason that a lot of people in this movement have not raised formal demands is because formal demands legitimize the oppressor so to speak, you know, they legitimize the established government. Our specific demands, you know, I would like to see, if we are talking about reforming the existing system, I would like to see Glass Steagall law reinstated, I would like to see massive reforms limiting campaign contributions, you know people jumping back and forth between office and private sector jobs which is a big problem but you know what a lot of people don’t get about this movement is that the means are the ends. You know, OWS is an alternative model of community, it’s an alternative model of how people can govern themselves.

The diversity of Occupy participants in New York City cannot be overemphasized, and it is significant that respondents emphasized that (1) the contemporary political economic system is geared toward reproducing an elite and (2) they perceived that the community with which they most closely identified is increasingly vulnerable.

Site II – Detroit

Less than a month after Zuccotti Park was occupied a meeting was held in Detroit’s Spirit of Hope Church with the objective of forming a local chapter of Occupy. The first action of this group was a political march and rally, on October 14, 2011, in which participants marched from a monument named Spirit of Detroit through the heart of Detroit’s business district along Woodward Avenue. The march ended less than a mile away at Grand Circus Park, which is located between office buildings and an entertainment district that includes theaters, bars and nightclubs, and Comerica Park (the stadium of the Detroit Tigers, a professional baseball team). Occupiers established a permanent encampment in the park, which included 150 tents, a kitchen and a welcome center. As in Zuccotti Park, participants formed working groups and established the procedures for general assemblies.

Detroit has a long history of political activism and social struggle. As the center of modern manufacturing (Aglietta, 1979), Detroit was a center of working-class struggles. Its labor unions had an uneasy relationship with emancipatory politics, and African-American civil rights campaigners and more radical elements of the organized labor movement
routinely accused unions of collaborating with auto manufacturers (Georgakas & Surkin, 1975). The divides along race and class lines were reinforced by zoning policies (see Jackson, 1985), that produced an urban landscape that remains the most racially segregated in the United States according to 2010 Census data (Logan & Stults, 2011). Nevertheless our research suggests that Occupy was able to suture class and racial divides. Occupy Detroit’s diverse participants were comprised of stalwart labor union activists, eco-feminists, civil rights campaigners, military veterans, communists and middle-class suburbanites. One very active member who was also involved in organized labor explained:

> Labor unions and Occupy work together. Everyone wants to be able to make a living; everyone wants to be able to make a wage to support their family, to send their kids to school, to the doctor, to the dentist. Everyone wants to be able to retire one day and that’s being threatened right now. Labor voices have been stepped on. But this Occupy Movement has the ability to… It has already changed the conversation…It has the ability to be heard and to put everybody including the laborer and to say hey! This is an honorable job! These people just can’t make enough money to support themselves. It’s being taken away from them. So laborers support the Occupy Movement. Because, we are the voice of bunch of individuals!

A more explicitly anti-capitalist sentiment was expressed by a university student:

> My demands come from a sort of eco-feminist point of view and I would like to see the world where we are able to see in harmony with nature and animals and seeing that everything is interconnected and I believe that a lot of these problems are part of the system of capitalist patriarchy. I also believe that capitalist patriarchy has oppressed women, animal, the earth and every other minority group. So I think that all comes back to the system. I see it all connected. So I honestly hope for the dismantling of the system.

Finally, a young man explained that to his goals were local and modest:

> When you look around the city of Detroit, you know the lack of houses the foreclosures, and growing up here, knowing what it was like before, what choice do I have [but to participate in Occupy]?...I think capitalism is fine, I think the
greed of capitalism is the problem, and I think the banks is where it starts at…I like this system but I think it needs work, it needs fine-tuning.

The Grand Circus Park occupation exhibited very different characteristics than its New York City counterpart. Most significantly, the relationship between Occupy and local authorities was not overtly antagonistic. Interview respondents explained that municipal authorities and police remained ambivalent or even ‘welcoming’ toward the occupation, perhaps because the Occupy rhetoric targeted Wall Street financiers. The fact that Wall Street firms whose actions precipitated the 2008 financial crisis received unseemly bailouts from the Federal Government while there was opposition in Washington to the comparatively small bailout of General Motors, meant that there was a general sentiment of anger toward financial elites. One respondent explained that:

The government is kind of like welcoming, more so than other governments. You know they haven’t been like, you know, in Denver they were just burning, just burned down their Occupy site and had a big clash with police. We haven’t had that here, you know, the government and police officers are more into welcoming Occupy because they see it every day. They [the municipal government and police] might not see it like that in New York, you know, but everyone sees it here in Detroit, just ride down in the street you’ll see it.

By ‘it’ the respondent was referring to Detroit’s ongoing crisis, which includes factory closures and home foreclosures. Years of decline have left many residents unhoused and municipal authorities have scarce resources to provide this precarious population with support. Occupy Detroit struggled to define its relationship with the city’s unhoused, who eagerly took advantage of the meals dispensed by the Occupy kitchen. There is evidence that municipal authorities viewed Occupy as welcome relief to overburdened public systems; Occupy participants reported that on numerous occasions the police dropped off unhoused people at the occupation. Interview respondents complained that they were not interested in participating in general assembly meetings, and that their presence precipitated an overall feeling of insecurity. Furthermore, respondents explained that they felt they could not depend on police to provide security, and this prevented more people from staying at the park overnight. One participant claimed that she was interested in explaining Marxism to other participants but that political education was impossible given the time and energy that were required to simply prepare food and provide security. In November there was a consensus to relocate to a nearby building that included a warehouse and some apartments where
participants could live. The space was owned by one of the movement’s main organizers and he allowed participants to stay there free of charge. The building was in a state of disrepair, and workers from a local chapter of a large labor union made some minor renovations to make it more usable. The warehouse area was ultimately transformed into a comfortable common area where meetings were held.

One evening in December Occupy participants met at Grand Circus Park to demonstrate, and the mood was convivial as they socialized and held signs and banners. While the atmosphere was positive there was a sense that the movement had entered a new phase and that without a site of occupation the movement was in decline; a Fox News van drove past and one of the occupiers shouted: ‘Hey, we’re over here!’ While meant as a comical commentary on Fox News’ reporting biases, implicit was an understanding that the movement was old news. Nevertheless, the mood was celebratory and activists expressed a sense of achievement in transgressing longstanding divides. Detroit recently declared bankruptcy and this has engendered a contentious politics surrounding the provision of basic services, pensions for city employees and repayment of publicly held debt (Davey & Walsh, 2013). It remains unclear how the bonds forged through Occupy will affect the politics surrounding Detroit’s bankruptcy which places a politics of vulnerability front and center.

Site III – Berlin

Nearly one month after the occupation of Zuccotti Park, a series of demonstrations were held in cities across the world, but mainly in Europe. The demonstrations were held in solidarity with the Occupy Movement in the United States, but it is important to note that in some instances the demonstrations were organized by groups whose activities pre-dated the emergence of Occupy Wall Street (e.g. Spain’s Indignados). Thus, in many of the cities across Europe where demonstrations were held on 15 October, mobilizations were manifestations of ongoing discontent that had found an outlet in anti-austerity protests in countries severely affected by the financial crisis such as Spain, Greece, Ireland and Iceland. For this reason it is notable that on October 15 the Occupy Movement emerged in Berlin, which had been spared from extreme austerity measures. Interviews were conducted with participants at this and subsequent mass mobilizations, as well as with activists who actively organized Occupy events on a regular basis.

As many as ten-thousand people participated in the initial Occupy demonstration in Berlin on October 15, and it was notable for the diversity of its participants. According to the Sueddeutsche Zeitung: ‘Naked, left radicals, retirees, students – gathered in front of the
Reichstag on Sunday as part of the Occupy Berlin demonstration. Seldom have so many different types of people protested together [in Germany]’ (Beitzer, 2011). Our research demonstrates that like their North American counterparts, Berlin’s diverse occupiers consistently portrayed themselves as increasingly vulnerable. One young man explained:

We are protesting for a better world and against the dominance of the global market, the financial system and the politics behind it…if you look around you see a lot of old people who were probably protesting in the 60s but now they are back. Because late capitalism has created new conditions and has caused problems for everybody.

Note that ‘problems’ are unspecified by this respondent, but this was common way that respondents framed their participation and it reflected a general feeling of powerlessness that cannot be rectified by a list of policy interventions. Another young man attributed this feeling of powerlessness to an all-encompassing economic system: ‘I feel that our right to live is threatened by the power of the economy’. The ‘right to live’ was not meant literally because the respondent was clearly not particularly precarious. Instead, this respondent, like many others, highlighted the inability of many people to practice particular lifestyles. For example, another respondent explained:

Everybody should have the chance to live a good life, everybody and everywhere in the world. I want that everybody can go to work and can live the life they like with the money they earn, that everybody can go to school, everybody can go on holidays, and everybody can travel. This is not the case anymore and less and less people are able to do these.

Traveling to the Mediterranean for a week of summer sun was a symbol of the good life in Germany to which many people, from workers to bourgeoisie, felt entitled. The fact that holidays are now unaffordable to many people – whether it be a three-day jaunt to a budget hotel or a weeklong trip to an all-inclusive resort – forces people to reflect on deeply rooted conceptualizations of themselves and German society. For university students this means an unpredictable future, but for people who experienced West Germany’s post-war Wirtschaftswunder (economic miracle) a lifetime of progress seems jeopardized:

I was born in 1967. For my parents’ generation everything seemed to be OK if you were from the middle class. The world seemed to be all right. There was an
infinite belief in the future, that things will remain good. I was also socialized like this. But today the situation is totally different. The Occupy Movement is therefore a turning point for us. Everybody is demonstrating, from different backgrounds. Even Adenauer people are now supporting the Occupy Movement. Because it is about something which everybody shares and feels, regardless of ideologies.

The ‘Adenauer people’ to which the respondent refers are supporters of West Germany’s post-war government led by Konrad Adenauer. In the aftermath of the Second World War the government of West Germany was unable to lay claim to legitimacy as the (1) representative of ‘the people’ or (2) the manifestation of the will of a sovereign (Foucault, 2008). Michel Foucault (2008) argues that the legitimacy of West Germany’s government was based on its capacity to tame the irrationality of the market and ensure robust economic growth. Not everyone in West Germany supported Adenauer’s techno-managerial art of government, and in 1968 a wave of popular protests – what social movement scholars term a ‘new’ social movement – swept across West Germany. One respondent was a 62-year-old woman who claimed to have been politically active in the late 1960s, and she explained the difference between Occupy and 1960s activism:

After 1968 I didn’t think I will see such mobilizations again in my life. I can’t believe that this is happening and I am very optimistic about it because everybody is involved in this movement. It is not only students, youth or intellectuals, you see people from all social and age groups joining this and showing interest. This tells us something about the conditions we are living in.

The main site of the demonstration in Berlin was in front of the Reichstag where Germany’s parliament convenes. A number of tents were erected and Berlin police reacted swiftly. While their tactics were less violent than the New York Police Department’s, demonstrators were nevertheless subjected to violence which, if not perpetrated by the state would be considered assault. Occupations were later established at other peripheral parts of Berlin, and the movement later moved indoors to a museum where Occupy activists put their art and ideas on display. The main point for this article is that a politics of vulnerability served as the cornerstone of the Occupy Movement in Berlin, and allowed for the mobilization of elderly ‘68 activists, ‘Adenauer people’ and young radicals.
Conclusion: Restructuring Progressive Politics

In this article we have argued that the master signifier of Occupy is vulnerability, around which a diverse range of actors cohered. Those who participated in Occupy shared a conceptualization that contemporary political economic systems provide security to elites and increase vulnerability of everyone else. While they experienced vulnerability differently and with varying intensity, Occupy participants shared an anxiety about their relative inability to adapt to shocks and stresses whose occurrence seems increasingly likely since the financial crisis. As a result, there was a shared sense that social reproduction is jeopardized or unlikely.

By recentering progressive politics around the concept of vulnerability Occupy fostered alliances among people with diverse political subjectivities, such as eco-feminists and labor union activists. Unlike earlier hegemonic impositions of working-class political subjectivities that erased difference (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001[1985]), vulnerability is a concept that can suture the differences among a range of political subjectivities and render ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements complementary without erasing their particularities. For example, in the United States issues taken up by ‘new’ social movements (e.g. gay marriage) hitherto unfolded in a series of ‘culture wars’ while there was a consensus among political elites regarding the governance of markets (e.g. the Democratic Party under Bill Clinton deregulated the banking sector and rolled back welfare).

The emergence of vulnerability as the master signifier was a discursive framing of contemporary society that galvanized a broad range of actors and support for Occupy. It is too early to determine the durability of the alliances among diverse groups formed during Occupy. Thus, the question remains whether the politics of vulnerability can serve as a progressive platform upon which a politics of redistribution can be resurrected and combined with so-called ‘identity politics’ in practice. If formal politics is infused with contingency there is potential to roll back what political theorists have called the ‘post-political condition’ in which governance is an exercise of managerialism. According to Jacques Ranciere (1999) politics requires the assertion of excluded groups – the ‘part of those who have no part’ –for a stake in decision-making, and their inclusion would inherently rework the established social and economic order of things. The post-political condition does not recognize ‘those who have no part’ as political subjects capable of making claims, and instead it reduces them to an undifferentiated destitute mass in need of salvation (see Agamben, 1998). For example, as a result of recent tragedies in the Mediterranean and episodic violence committed by police against asylum seekers, there is recognition among policy makers across Europe that a comprehensive policy framework must deal with questions surrounding asylum. However,
asylum seekers themselves are unable to participate in these discussions, and they remain very much a ‘part of those who have no part’. In one emblematic instance, asylum seekers were quartered in an abandoned school in the former East Berlin in the summer of 2013. As usual their movement was restricted and they could not legally work, but to make matters worse a group of rightwing extremists descended on the school-turned-shelter to protest their presence (Roth, 2013). Asylum seekers in Berlin have sought to enter into political debates, and they have occupied a central square and resorted to a hunger strike (Deutsche Welle, 2013; van Bebber, 2014). What is significant for this article is that the Berlin chapter of Occupy has been active in the politics of asylum. However, the troubled relationship between Occupy Detroit and the city’s most precarious population, its unhoused, raises questions regarding the politics of vulnerability’s limits of inclusion. Elsewhere an influx of unhoused persons challenged occupations, but often Occupy sought to incorporate the unhoused and contest the criminalization of homelessness (see Harrison, 2011; Kingkade, Miller & Knafo, 2011). Thus, future research on Occupy and other contemporary social movements should focus on the extent to which the concept of vulnerability allows ‘those who have no part’ to articulate disagreement and thereby move beyond the managerial post-political condition.

Another possibility is for Occupy to carve out a parallel political space that is disengaged from formal electoral politics. In New York City the Occupy Movement morphed into a self-help organization that worked in parallel to state-led relief efforts after Hurricane Sandy left thousands of people without basic services. Peter Marcuse (2011a, 2011b) celebrates the solidarity displayed by Occupy Sandy, but it is unclear if the ‘occupation’ of governmental responsibility – in this case disaster relief – will significantly mitigate vulnerability.

The Occupy Movement and future mobilizations which it will inspire must grapple with the difficult question of whether the most advantageous strategy is to pierce the post-political condition or practice a parallel politics. However, no matter the direction that movements take, it is significant that vulnerability has proven a compelling master signifier through which a diverse range of political actors could forge alliances. Perhaps the most compelling affirmation of Occupy’s inclusivity was made by a retired African-American autoworker in Detroit. He explained that in addition to being involved with labor politics on the shopfloor he was active in the Civil Rights Movement. When asked to compare Occupy with these struggles he explained that ‘this is not comparable to anything. I have been waiting for this moment my whole life. This is something for everybody. Everybody can relate to it and that makes it incomparable to anything else’. Many of the respondents in New York City,
Detroit and Berlin echoed that experience of working in solidarity with people from different backgrounds was electrifying. Thus, while we do not seek to overstate the emancipatory potential of a politics of vulnerability, we remain cautiously optimistic that vulnerability can serve as the cornerstone of renewed progressive politics that, from time to time, will motivate people to take to the streets in the name of justice.
References


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1Hereafter we refer to the Occupy Movement as ‘Occupy’.
2Footage of violent police behavior was posted on YouTube shortly after the assault: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bHKu4oSXlo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bHKu4oSXlo)