Occupy RGS(IBG) 2012

Carlus Hudson (University of Exeter & the Occupy Movement), in conversation with Ian Cook (University of Exeter)

Introduction:

Ian: When students in England started campaigning against the increase in University tuition fees in the Autumn of 2010, I joined a march in Exeter that ended up with the occupation of the University's largest lecture theatre for several weeks (Figure 1). What unfolded in that space was remarkable: passionate and lengthy debates and General Assemblies based on consensus decision-making about issues that mattered to the people involved; the watching on the big screen of unfolding political events by a lively audience; a social media team quickly forming to tweet and facebook what was happening here and elsewhere; students from the university, the local college, and elsewhere, university staff, their children and many others participating in the organisation, direction and buzz of an unfolding protest; strangers popping in with food, kettles, messages of support, and much more; a 'free university' being set up in

Figure 1: the start of Exeter Occupied (source Anon 2010)
& notes from its collaborative writing workshop (source Ian Cook).

which anyone could give a lecture on whatever topic they were interested in; any many academic staff, including me, offering lectures and workshops (see Burton et al).

A year later, Exeter was one of hundreds of locations around the world where protests in response to the financial crisis led to the Occupation of a public space - in this case the grounds of Exeter Cathedral - for many months. This brought together many of the people who had occupied the University, but also plenty of others, including a new cohort of University students. This Occupation was in the open air, in the centre of the city, in an iconic space, for all to see and encounter. A 'Tent university' was set up, but this time I wanted to find a way to bring not only what, but who, I was teaching into this public pedagogic space. A blogger who had seen Doreen Massey's talk at Occupy LSX said the 'follow the things' work I was introducing students to that term tried to counter the ridiculous abstractions of financial markets (Jeevendrampillai 2011 np) and Brett Christopher's (2011) 'follow the thing: money' paper had just been published. So I invited Occupy Exeter participants (including Carlus) to visit the University and talk to the students about Occupy, its purpose and governance, and its perspectives on the financial crisis. For the following three weeks, the module then relocated to the Tent

Figure 2: Cathedral Green: Occupy Exeter & Money Talks (source: Ian Cook).

University, conversations continued, and a 'Money talks' student art/activism exhibition eventually took place in a hall on the Green (Figure 2).

When Chris Philo called me to ask if I'd like to join him and Kye Askins to run a session in Edinburgh, I suggested that Occupy seemed to be missing from the Civic Geographies he had in mind. Although OccupyLA did have a 'civic engagement committee',[i] none of the Occupy literature I read at the time[ii] seemed to talk about the movement's 'shared space(s) of radical democratic possibility' in these terms (Sparke 2013, p.399). So I emailed Carlus Hudson, an Occupy Exeter participant and Exeter University student who I knew lived in Edinburgh and had spent time at its Occupy camp. I asked he and they would like to Occupy the conference's exhibition space for its full 3 days. I sent him the 'Civic Geographies' paper that Chris had sent to me (now updated as Philo et al this issue). Carlus contacted Occupy Edinburgh, wrote an abstract for the session and was not put off when the exhibition was reduced to one day because of concerns about their overnight camping. For this intervention, I interviewed Carlus about Occupy RGS(IBG)'s experience of the exhibition and session, the wider Occupy movement and what he thought about describing them in terms of Civic Geographies.

Figure 3: Occupy RGS(IBG) & the Civic Geographies exhibition (source: Joy Haywood).

Interview[iii]

Ian: Why did Occupy Exeter and Occupy Edinburgh want to participate in the Civic Geographies session and exhibition?

Carlus: The Occupy movement from the get-go had a strong element of linking protest with experiments in civics, and raising questions of the use of physical spaces. As a tactic for protesting, occupations are nothing new. The 1968 student movement for example occupied their universities, and occupations are a tactic sometimes used by workers carrying out industrial action.

The initial act of occupying a space requires the cooperation of a critical number of people. Those involved need to believe that they are numerous to, first of all take control of the space, and then to keep control of it over time. It is impossible to conceptualise the initial act of occupying a space without also conceptualising a normative idea of what the occupation will look like after the space is taken. It begs a creativity from occupiers, who - now in control of a space - have few if any restrictions on what they can do with it. Once decision-making processes and the material conditions of the occupied space and the occupiers are factored in, the occupation begins to develop its own cohesion and internal logic: in a sense, an occupation is its own civil society.

Because those decision-making processes develop on the spot and, while sometimes drawn from pre-existing models for decision-making (various forms of libertarian or cooperative socialism, anarchism, environmentalism, feminist and anti-racist movements in particular but not exclusively those examples) adapt based on the needs and objectives of the occupation that develop during the occupation. Decision-making structures formed in this way are dynamic, loose, are sustained by the initiative and energy of the occupiers, are built on inter-personal relations rather than structural ones, and so they tend towards a very non-restrictive and horizontal model for social organisation. While the initial issue that sparked the initial occupation is addressed by the occupation in a philosophically idealistic way, the logistical decisions of the occupation (providing the physical resources to carry out the initial objective of the occupation, making sure the basic physical needs of the people there are met, maintaining the physical space) are determined by the situation of the physical space itself. If the occupation takes place in a building next to a Starbucks with open wifi, that

presents opportunities for the occupation using the internet and having a strong social media presence. If the occupation is on the street in a city centre, that presents opportunities to directly engage members of the public. If the occupation is next to a supermarket, the chances are that occupiers' need for food will be met by shopping at that supermarket (or raiding its skip bins)

Beyond occupations in general, in the specific example of the Occupy movement, this general trend in social organisation became compounded by the ideological and political objectives of that movement. While occupations in general tend towards non-hierarchical organisation, because concepts like democracy, inclusivity, equality and empowerment were so central to the movement politically, a much greater emphasis was placed on utilising those loose horizontal structures making it an especially interesting case study in the links between physical space and civics. More than an Occupy movement occupation being a means to another political end as in the case of an occupation as part of an industrial dispute, for many individuals within the Occupy movement, the occupation and its internal social structures became the ends, and for others a strategy rather than a tactic. The loose and democratic structures within Occupy meant that while there would be a great deal of internal disagreement, there would by and large be a unity in action.

The aim of the exhibition at the RGS(IBG) conference was to give a glimpse of how the the occupations in Edinburgh and Exeter worked. Although communication between the two camps was irregular and they developed along their own unique paths, one function of both camps was to reach out to members of the public and explain what the Occupy movement was about. This often took the form of a stall at the front of the camp or what Occupy Exeter referred to as 'path work', with a rotating team composed of whoever was on-site dedicated to interacting with members of the public and discussing with them the Occupy movement and other political issues. A stall was set up in front of a tent at the conference, with lots of literature and other tools for outreach. Outreach needs a space in which those conversations can take place, and the exhibition aimed to emphasise that. Even the term 'path work' is loaded with a reference to a physical 'path'

and the 'work' aspect suggests a higher objective than the discussions themselves, emphasising that the outreach is from the Occupy movement as much as it is to those outside the movement.

There are lots of different aspects of the camps and the Occupy movement of which the exhibition was only the tip of the iceberg. The Occupy movement raised many questions about the use of physical spaces, the ways in which that use is decided by the group collectively, social dynamics and personal politics within those groups, and how the 'Occupation' ties in with the 'occupation'.

Ian: How different and/or similar was Occupy RGS(IBG) to your Occupy Edinburgh and Occupy Exeter experiences?

Carlus: In some ways the exhibition was more intense than the experiences had at the camps themselves, but in other ways less. For a start, simply being inside and only for a single day meant that the logistical issues and health & safety issues were much less dominating than they were at the camps. Because the Occupy presence was geared for a single aspect of a single event - the exhibition - it meant that a lot of the tactical questions for the immediate purpose of a presence were already answered before we went in, while for a full camp the issue is much more open-ended and has a greater number of opportunities for direct action spread over a loosely defined space (growing and shrinking organically depending on numbers on the camp) and indeterminate time (i.e. for however long the site can be held).

A lot of those opportunities for action were not fully and occasionally not at all realised. The exhibition, although it was less intense and had a much more concretely defined set of objectives and parameters, created an intensity of its own. With a fixed time and place for the exhibition, and a much more constant stream of people passing by, the margin of error was much smaller and the need to 'get it right' on the spot was much larger. While at a full camp, errors could be discussed at the General Assembly and learned from for future experiences and the future development of the camp and wider

movement. Being at a specific exhibition, there was only so much time and space Occupy had to work with. Thankfully, the day went perfectly smoothly and this issue was constrained to the anxieties of the people putting together the Occupy presence who wanted it to be a good exhibition!

The Occupiers had a lot to say with regards to the civic discussion, as questions of space and how we use it were constantly on our minds in the running of the camps both at a logistical and day-to-day level, but also in planning strategically for the next steps for the movement.

Ian: Could you describe the set-up in the exhibition space for readers who won't have seen you there?

Carlus: The set-up was very similar to how an information tent at an occupation would function, with a table to use as a stall for leaflets, petitions and discussions, with a tent behind it for storage. The exhibition next to ours also had a tent, and although it was unrelated to our part of the exhibition, having multiple tents set up in the room definitely added to the Occupy atmosphere. The stall table had a number of leaflets and other literature which occupy Edinburgh had been using regularly, as well as a number of books to highlight the library feature of many occupations, although it was more common for a camp library to have its own tent rather than just a space on a stall table. There was also food on the stall to share around, emphasising that the occupations often ate communally the food donated to us by sympathetic members of the public. A lot of the conversations we had were with people who had either never heard of the Occupy movement or had very limited knowledge of it and were eager to learn more, or they were already decided on supporting or opposing the movement when they stopped for a chat. This was very reflective of the conversations had on the camps themselves, with a minority of people totally decided on their opinion of the movement coming simple to express that opinion, but a vast majority of people open to the new ideas and ways of thinking and organising a small society that Occupy offered.

Ian: Could you describe the Occupy contribution to the civics discussion, both in relation to the document sent around before the conference, and in relation to the discussion /debate on the day?

Carlus: The interesting thing about the Occupy movement is that because of its longevity and the commitment of individual activists to the movement, it was not long before the movement, particularly on the camps themselves, adopted some of the features of a society with its own cultural and social institutions and internal logic. Questions of how space was to be used were central to a lot of the every-day workings of the camps like decisions for where to place a new library tent, to the more strategic and political decisions about whether to set up a second - satellite - camp or a squat, to the very ethos of the camps combining a nomadic aspect because of the temporary nature of the camp's physical structures (the tents) with a defiance to the authorities to hold the space as long as possible (an aspiration towards permanence) reflected in the construction on some camps of semi-permanent wooden structures and fortifying the camp's periphery to secure it at night. The introduction of safer spaces policies gives the communities on the camps a sense of an explicit social contract and a set of values holding the camp together alongside the slogan of 'We are the 99%' holding the movement as a whole together. These are themes which appeared in what Occupy Edinburgh wrote for the conference beforehand and in what was discussed on the day itself.

However it would be a mistake to treat the Occupy movement's contribution to a discussion of civics as practicing what could straightforwardly be described as a form of 'civics'. In one sense, the questions that were raised by the Occupy movement and the way in which the Occupy camps were run formed a critique of the notion of 'civics', or even arguably formed an 'anti-civics'. The term 'civics' itself is derived from Latin and so harks back to the Greco-Roman world which to a large degree inspired contemporary notions of modernity and a very particular idea of what 'civilization' means. Civics in this context means considerably more than what it literally entails: it holds considerable baggage from an aesthetic and feature of the post-Enlightenment era modern world and

the social and political systems that have emerged as part of it. Much of the terminology of contemporary politics, including the terms 'politics' and 'civics' themselves, have this origin. Occupy, by trying to be a critique of every aspect of the prevailing political, economic, social and cultural system, must therefore be an anti-civic in the sense of its opposition to the underlying assumptions and sometimes respectability that civics – shown very aptly its related word 'civility' - can entail.

A public library for example might be seen as an unbiased or objective institution integral to civil society, but the ways in which a state-controlled or even a private and for-profit library will have to fit the norms and standards that its owners wish it to making a library a fundamentally subjective institution. The selection of subversive books and other literature displayed at the exhibition by ORGS demonstrated that the norms and standards of a certain type of library can be very different from the norms and standards of another type of library depending on what form of 'civic' it fits into. The element of neo-classical architecture of the building for the National Library of Scotland gives away the kind of 'civic' it is part of. Norms and standards can be anything but actually normal or standard. By demonstrating alternatives to the prevailing civic, ORGS and Occupy in general were a form of anti-civic but in doing so created a form of counter-civics as well. The best comparison to this would be the relationship between the 'politics' and the 'anti-politics' of anarchism, discussed particularly by Saul Newman (Figure 4).

The collaboration between the Edinburgh and Exeter Occupations for the movement's part in the exhibition shows that even despite working with minimal resources and despite being on opposite sides of the country, they can still work effectively together as one unit towards a common objective. Essential to the movement's survival was each camp remembering that they were part of something greater than themselves; they were able to cooperate as polities in ways that multiple nation-states have proven

Figure 4: Saul Newman: Postanarchism between Politics and Anti-Politics [2]
(Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWs_Ba9OKVY)

incapable of in their preference for self-interest instead of collective good. Occupy retained, and where it is still active continues to retain, a concept and practice of anti-civics or counter-civics as a form of civics itself.

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[i] See http://www.ustream.tv/channel/occupylacivicengagement (last accessed 1 April 2013)

[ii] See, for example, the short papers here http://societyandspace.com/2011/11/18/forum-on-the-occupy-movement/ (last accessed 1 April 2013)

[iii] This is an edited version of an email conversation which includes some quotation from the ORGS(IBG)'s proposed contribution form. Ian edited the text and the final version was agreed with Carlus in April 2013, and revised by both authors after editorial comments in May / June 2013. Thanks go to Chris Philo for encouraging us, and to Occupy Exeter, Occupy Edinburgh, and RGS occupiers Tom Webster, Suzie Sutherland and Liam Allan for taking part.