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Occupy Sandy: Revolutionary Subjectivity and Communication

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Introduction

My paper looks at the use of communication technologies by Occupy Sandy, a relief network developed initially by Occupy Wall Street activists to address the devastation of Hurricane Sandy. In moments of rupture like these, certain phenomena reoccur that suggest that the civic base is activated by a deeply ingrained ethics to help one another. At the same time, from the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, to Mexico City in 1985, Katrina in 2005, and Sandy in 2012, a sad trend of government ineffectiveness and reactionary response points to disaster's rare effect of leveling structures of domination and disrupting the status quo. A struggle between autonomous, bottom-up organization and top-down authority inevitably ensues. These moments also offer examples of how the civic base use communication technologies in potentially revolutionary ways. I will theorize communication technologies as the objectification of social relations, and therefore, always already a social force and potential revolutionary tool.

My paper ties together the theories of Marx on machinery, the fetish, and Marcuse's discussion of technology and needs in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). I also take a few notes from Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation* (1969), where the philosopher discusses the formation of new aesthetic subjectivities, latently, and in preparation for revolution. While I do not situate my analysis in terms of aesthetic practices per se, I do concern myself with sensuousness and immediacy, and think that the subjectivities developed through OWS and Occupy Sandy can be characterized in similar terms to Marcuse's revolutionary subjectivity. Occupy Sandy organizers and volunteers demonstrated, how preparation, in practice, and as a mode of thinking, may culminate in large-scale, effective organization. As I will discuss, preparation, like mutual aid, education, and

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direct action, are long-standing tenets of anarchism, all of which were grounding principles of the Occupy Sandy relief effort.

Authority and Autonomous Organization

In my early research of Occupy Sandy, I came across a brief, but informative text by Harry Cleaver called "The Uses of an Earthquake" (1987) about the catastrophic 1985 Mexico City earthquake. Cleaver argues that environmental disasters offer unique possibilities of intervention for people oppressed by the state and exploited by capitalism, because the flows of domination are rendered temporarily immobile. In the case of Mexico City, the administrative center was leveled as was the central telephone exchange. The main mode of communication became radio, predominantly by amateur operators, who announced or sought the locations of family and friends in the earthquake's devastation. A theme arising in Cleaver's text is picked up in other accounts of natural disaster as the local *administration* (using Marcuse's term) asserts and simultaneously fumbles away its legitimacy. Elena Poniatowska's *Nothing, Nobody* (1995) is an archive of personal and news accounts from the earthquake: the leveled homes, workplaces, hospitals; the immediate and untiring civilian response, and an irrational administration, for several days, declining and turning away international aid, saying Mexico was 'self-sufficient.' It is heartwrenching to read, but so demonstrative of the mutual aid tendency. Radios, rescue brigades, kitchens, any car that worked, all went into service to survivors, while the administration asserted its authority through coercive and legal measures, protecting or coveting property. As one Mexico City resident put it,

> people [went out and got] organized, not to govern, but to help…The government is organized to control, to maintain the institutions and the status quo, not to help the population. For the government the well-being of the people is a secondary matter. What is important is to exercise power. (Poniatowska 1995:291)

Similarly, Rebecca Solnit (2010) draws a line from the mayor's order during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, *that looters will be shot on site!* to the panic surrounding Hurricane Katrina; this construction and persecution of people in disaster as a lawless mob. Put in more fetishistic terms, the administration moves to protect not people, but things, and tends to undo the positive effects of the popular relief work. Where mutual

aid provided relief in the streets in San Francisco, cooking and eating with strangers who became friends, the administration moved to reterritorialize the provision of welfare, and turned community kitchens into bread lines (Solnit 2010:47).

The response to the grassroots organizing of Occupy Sandy was less violent than in other cases, but they certainly felt resistance, not least of which because it operated in ways totally incongruent to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and their parent organization, the Department of Homeland Security. In their approach to Occupy Sandy, the Department of Homeland Security took a more insidious approach: monitoring them in their early days as a threat, then undertaking a fairly robust study of Occupy Sandy, published in a report called
"The Resilient Social Network" (Homeland Security Studies 2013) subtitled "@OccupySandy #SuperstormSandy." Here, Occupy Sandy's use of social media is foregrounded as the most important element of the project's success.

Occupy Sandy and Technology

Accounts emphasizing the importance of social media for Occupy Sandy are accurate, but the motivating, organizing force of the project cannot be as easily objectified and studied, as the Department of Homeland Security would like to make it. The isolation of social media from the ensemble in which Occupy Sandy operated is paralleled generally by the administration's oppressive and abstract approaches to relief. It is true that Occupy Sandy could not be effective without the mediation of communication technologies, on the scale and to the degree that it was. Twitter, facebook, constituent resource management software, google docs, amazon gift registries, conference calling applications, and other technologies enabled Occupy Sandy to serve need, first and foremost. Organizing on the basis of need is one of the fundamental premises of Peter Kropotkin's anarchism (2006; 2007), of mutual aid and cooperation.

Crucial to Occupy Sandy's system was their canvassing effort, which provided the data translated into the digital applications I've listed: locations and indications of need from survivors, reached in their flooded, lightless homes, where FEMA and Red Cross did not dare to go, those details entered into Amazon gift registries, specifying donation needs based on the canvass forms; others tweet, seeking volunteers to deliver donations,

clean up homes, cook food.[1] The hundreds of thousands of volunteers that performed these tasks over several months registered through the constituent resource management software, advertised for institutional uses, e.g. targeting financial donors. A significant difference between Occupy Sandy and FEMA or the Red Cross is that Occupy Sandy put willing and eager volunteers to work within an hour of their arrival, while it could take days to be processed by the other agencies. The main sites of activity were hubs set up in churches, veteran's halls, and community centers where donations were organized, food cooked, and distributed, and volunteers trained and dispatched. Large hubs, like the one in Newark, NJ operated 24hrs a day and were the receiving sites for 50ft transport trucks carrying the donations requested through the various means already listed. A handful of large hubs communicated with smaller ones throughout the devastated neighbourhoods of New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island.

Using a conference calling technology called Maestro, Occupy Sandy was able to hold telemeetings with hundreds of organizers and even maintain the consensus-style deliberation used in Occupy assemblies by coding responses to number keys. They still use Maestro on a weekly basis, holding calls regarding ongoing issues in their neighbourhoods, e.g. raising the minimum wage, renter's rights, and broader issues, like climate change and international trade agreements. These calls can also take the form of day-long seminars or conferences. This commitment to education began in the hub spaces, as reflexive learning environments, where organizers and volunteers learned to do relief work on an ad hoc basis. Occupy Sandy also drew on its connection with former Katrina relief organizers to learn how to safely approach flooded and mold-ridden homes. In this give and take of knowledge from the past, in the present devastation, and with an eye to the future, Occupy Sandy adheres to anarchist principles of pedagogy, where "learning and teaching…become an integrated element of life itself" (Amster 2002:437)

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[1] Descriptions of Occupy Sandy tools and methods of organization come from my preliminary research on the subject, presented as a case study in my Master's thesis *Food Ontology and Distribution: Ethical Perception and the Food Object* (2014). I learned a great deal from two conversations with Occupy Sandy New Jersey's media contact, Katt Ramos; I present some of those details here with her permission.

The Fetish and Machinery

Marcuse argues for the possibility of translating needs into values, and "the translation of values into technical tasks" (1964:232). These tasks are implicated in a "twofold process of (1) material satisfaction...and (2) the free development of needs on the basis of satisfaction" (1964:234). Focused so much on relieving need, Occupy Sandy, I believe began this process of translation. Their use of technology, in Charles Thorpe and Ian Welsh's terms, embodies "the principle of unmediated interest representation and thus direct engagement of affected parties…as well as the obligation and commitment to education of wider communities in the associated stakes" (2008:69).

I think Marcuse is deliberate in his language describing this translation of values into technical tasks and objects. It rings similar to Marx's description of the objectification of social relations in things or the fetish (1976), and especially his discussion of machinery (1976; 1973).

As the essence of humans are objectified into use-values and sold as commodities, our sociability is objectified into communication technologies, which are the product of social knowledge (what Marx calls the general intellect). Seeing the machine as a discrete entity apart from its social origin and as the ends of communication, is fetishistic. The qualities bestowed upon it, as an interface and a medium, are the alienated qualities of cooperative, communicating beings; the social relations between people are seen as the social relations between things, i.e. the quality of their communicative power is seen as intrinsic to machines rather than the people who use them to communicate. It's as if Twitter started a revolution in Tunisia, followed by Egypt, and not the people themselves. It also undermines, as Dan Schiller (2013) argues, the history of resistance and organizing in those regions.

Our sociability has been subsumed and, according to Jose van Dijck (2012), changed by the means we use to communicate. Van Dijck uses David Harvey's notion of dispossession by accumulation and applies it to our communication on social network platforms. First he notes how our communication is engineered, limited by the interface and available widgets, to be all the more exploitable by commercial interests. He goes on to refer to this latest wave of capital accumulation as a dispossession of sociability (van Dijck 2012:169), the objectification of our social interaction as commodity. This, in a

sense, is not a new idea; you find it in Marx's discussion of cooperative labour processes which are subsumed by capital and mediated by technical instruments and objects. Capital relies on human cooperation: for the productive power of social labour "arises from cooperation itself" (Marx 1976:447). It is the social labour of individuals, their cooperation, that is objectified in machinery. As Marx states, machinery represents, not the worker's individual and direct labour, but "the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body" (1973:705).

Thorpe and Welsh remind us, that "rather than the universal acceptance of technique and the imposition of autonomous technology it is important not to lose sight of science and technology as socially contested and socially constructed enterprises" (2010:52). Technologies are part of societal ensembles but their role need not be fetishized. Our deferral to technologies and technique has changed the horizon of being, so that we take direction from machines and organizational scripts and do not interact with one another in ethical immediacy because of it.

For me this ethical immediacy is best understood in relation to the concept of care as the being Heidegger (2010) gives to Dasein, which for the sake of brevity, is the human. Care is attention, thought, it is that which is drawn by the senses to objects of concern—people, things, events, ruptures. Marx, Lukásc (1967), and Marcuse would perhaps agree that attention is diverted, deferred, or suspended by technical prosthesis that see and do for us, but do not see, act, or care like a human can. If our sociality is objectified in communication technologies, so too is an aspect of our being as care. To defetishize technology is to potentially restore care to human activity. This would involve the reinstatement of the sensuous in the social, which rupture inevitably brings about. Rupturous moments are horizon forming and can bring people back to the immediacy of care, their attention drawn to the present, to the pain of survivors, and the need to act quickly. Where care is deferred and objectified in objects and institutions, such moments are rare. Moreover, the administration continues to defer, as an object-institution, even in the face of devastation.

Programming/Preparation

The stakes of this analysis comes down to what mechanisms we do and don't have access to in crisis. Kropotkin says "The ideal of modern industry is a child tending a machine that he cannot and must not understand" (1994:209).

The means of communication were available to Occupy Sandy, but much of the necessary information for relief work is bureaucratized or privatized. Inventories and blueprints that could facilitate efficient distribution of food and supplies are not public. Because information is privatized (or atomized between different bureaucratic departments) what is needed socially is treated as isolated phenomena. Things, not relations. Spurring the creation of long-term recovery groups, Occupy Sandy endeavours to produce and distribute knowledge to ensure communities aren't left helpless in disaster, so they can effectively help each other. Occupy Sandy's use of digital applications were as much about transparency as preparing an 'info packet' of sorts for other community groups to use and adapt to their circumstances. The conference call-style of knowledge distribution is another example of Occupy Sandy's program of preparedness.

Preparation and practice are important aspects of anarchist thinking, and integral to realizing revolutionary potential, at the site of the individual and the collective. It is what, according to Harry Cleaver and Elena Poniatowska, allowed the Mexico City earthquake survivors to form a powerful front. There was spontaneity in the people's organization—as earthshattering events require—but as Cleaver notes, "the ability of people to organize themselves grew out of a long history of autonomous struggle" (1987:np). In the Tepito neighbourhood, nearly 300 community organizations existed prior to the earthquake, providing services for people already overlooked by city officials. Out of the popular relief effort grew two important movements: one, the first women-led garment worker's union was established, counting over 5000 members from 82 shops in its first month; and second, a movement to expropriate the homes of earthquake survivors resulted in the seizure of some 7,000 buildings.

In the Spanish civil war, the revolution in collective organization "took place in the context of 70 years of anarchist and socialist organising, and, beyond that, of centuries-old Spanish traditions of collectivism and communalism" (Ackelsberg 1993:368).

According to Martha Ackelsberg (1993:373), the Spanish anarchists embodied " the principle of 'preparation' for revolution *as* revolution." These revolutionary moments passed, but we would be remiss to forget their lessons. Preparation is a form of programming, and anticipation, that must however remain open-ended. Occupy Sandy was grounded in already existing networks of activists and guided by an established program of mutual aid. Katt Ramos of Occupy Sandy New Jersey said it was because of the lived experience of Sandy's devastation, that a plan to keep up communication after the storm became an active effort to provide relief. Both prepared and open-ended in practice, Occupy Sandy embodies something like the aesthetic sensibility Marcuse claims is the ground of revolutionary subjectivity. He describes this sensibility as:

> a shift of emphasis toward "subjective factors": the development of awareness and needs assumes primary importance…Under these circumstances, radical change in consciousness is the beginning, the first step in changing social existence: the emergence of the new Subject. Historically, it is again the period of enlightenment prior to material change - - a period of education, but education which turns into praxis. (1969:40)

It is emphasized by Marcuse that the preconditions for self-determination is the "universal all-sided education toward exchangeability of functions" (1964:45). The revolutionary subject is directed toward potential, the 'if.' Marcuse describes this 'if as "essential to historical progress—it is the element of freedom (and chance!) which opens the possibilities of conquering the necessity of the given facts" (1964:223). And what bigger 'if' is there than an earthquake or hurricane?

Now, to talk of revolutionary subjectivity is certain to welcome detractors, as I seem to tread close to orthodox dualisms of the proletariat and bourgeoisie—in my own analysis, the organizer and administrator—and I will cite Anselm Jappe (2013) on the trappings of such thinking. Because we are currently subjects of capitalism, Jappe argues that any revolutionary subjectivity we may wish to develop out of our current state will never offer us complete emancipation. "The subject is therefore that from which we must be emancipated, and not that through which and in terms of which we must be emancipated" (Jappe 2013:np). I do not think, however, that subjectivity itself (or fetishism for that matter) is problematic; it is the reification of certain subject-forms to

the exclusion of all others, in society and within the individual. This reified subject is das Man in Heidegger, and the operationalized man in Marcuse.

Anarchist philosophy and practice seems to emphasize the potential of embodying multiple subjectivities, which tends to happen on the ground in moments of crisis, as people use and share whatever skills they have to help each other. After the tremendously exhausting days of relief in Mexico City, a citizen spoke of his newfound potential: "Now we are skilled jacks-of-all-trades; we can do everything, from fixing a car...moving it if it is parked in the wrong place, controlling traffic, distributing food, giving first aid, and listen to this, cooking" (Poniatowska 1995:308). It is a list of the most banal tasks, but evidently, the most empowering. This observation agrees with a statement made in relation to the Spanish anarchists, who thought "that the essence of oppression is the denial of people's sense of their own capabilities" (Ackelsberg 1993:368). Within Occupy Sandy, the line between volunteer, survivor, and organizer was blurred, as survivors became engaged on their own streets and neighbourhoods, but eventually branching out, and in some cases, becoming a fixture in the organizing effort itself. More importantly, many survivors-cum-organizers are still active in the recovering communities, now more comfortable with using terms like mutual aid and using direct action to address community needs. Shifting subject forms, a plurality of skills, and most important, empowerment mark these moments of rupture and constitute their revolutionary potential. But as Marcuse says, without practice, not even rupture can free us (1964:xlvii).

Rupture

Marcuse anticipates the rupture, "the danger" perpetuated by the contemporary industrial society of the mid-twentieth century—though he speaks particularly of atomic catastrophe (1964:xli). Climate change and its devastating effects pose new dangers.

As Thorpe and Welsh state (2008:69),

Climate change can be allowed to legitimize new forms of state techno-authoritarianism, seeing the emergence of authoritarian state regimes of environmental management regulating us in the name of the scarcities of an ever-

degraded environment…Or, climate change can be responded to along the lines which thinkers such as Mumford [and] Bookchin...have long-advocated – with regional, decentralized, liberatory, renewable technologies.

By moving to meet needs with immediacy, and with the knowledge of oppressive structures come before them, Occupy Sandy shows us what anarchist preparation and organization look like in times of rupture. For Marcuse, freedom and the potential for it, begins with the reorganization of the technical base towards vital needs. In disaster, vital needs dominate. Perhaps that is where the ground of freedom can be more readily sewn.

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