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Mic Check: How the 99% Pitched a Movement from Occupy Wall Street to Occupy Cal

By Jacob Bintliff

On September 17, 2011, a small group of people set up tents in downtown Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park, renamed it Liberty Park, and announced their intention to “Occupy Wall Street.” This bold symbolic action was the beginning of a movement that shook the nation’s political discourse free from a sanitized narrative of taxpayers and budget deficits, and awakened the American public to the stark inequities of daily life in the 21st century. The Occupy Movement, widely broadcast via traditional and new media alike, shifted public opinion and spurred policy initiatives such as President Obama’s “Buffet Rule” and the “Millionaires Tax” in California. For the first time, a majority of Americans see class conflict between rich and poor as the top source of social tension in the United States. (Morin 2012).



Crowds gather at a rally protesting tuition hikes to point fingers at the administration. Photo by Emma Lantos, Nov. 9, 2011.

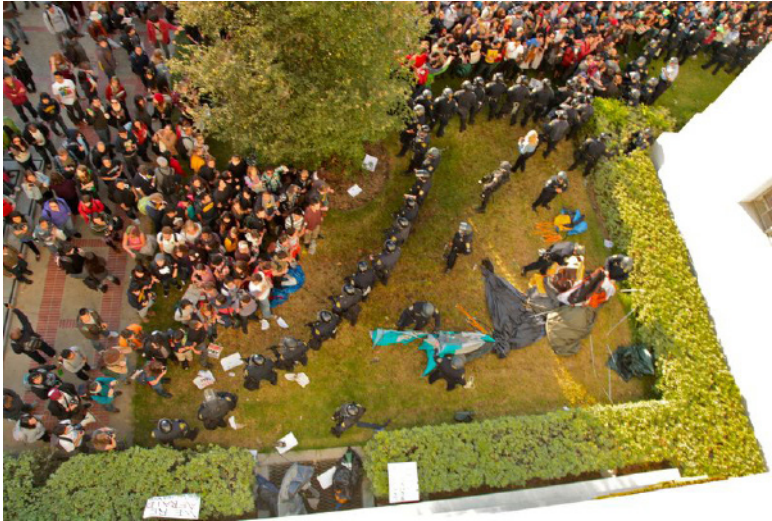
Within a couple of months, the national consciousness was awakened, not by any public relations campaign or mass rally, but through the public’s reimagining itself as “the 99%.” This emergent public defined itself in a new language of symbols and shared practice—of tents, general assemblies, and the “people’s microphone”—that transformed countless

public spaces. Throughout the fall of 2011, from Zuccotti Park to the wide sidewalks of Market Street in San Francisco to Oakland's Frank Ogawa Plaza and beyond, the 99% sprang up in a repeated ritual of reclamation—of space, of community, and of political discourse. Spaces that had been accepted unquestioningly as monolithic civic manifestations of “the public at large” were suddenly occupied by an insurgent civitas. Central squares and public parks, all policed and passive places, were recast overnight as the symbolic loci of struggle against 21st century capital's destabilizing redistribution of wealth and civic access.



Student teach-out in front of Sproul Hall during campus general strike. Photo by Andrea Broaddus, Nov. 9, 2011.

The University of California, Berkeley, itself a manifestation of growing inequity, became one such site in Fall 2011. The University system was once cherished as a public good at the core of California's development strategy, with the Master Plan of 1960 famously promising free higher education to all California residents (Center for Studies in Higher Education 2012). Over the last several decades, though, the University has slowly been transformed into a profit machine, measured not in students educated but in abstract economic units of revenues and capital investment. Support from the state legislature has been cut by hundreds of millions of dollars, forcing fee hikes, layoffs and service cuts. Since 2002, in-state tuition and fees in the UC system increased by 242%, while the median California family income increased by only 25% (Rosenhall 2012). Throughout this transformation, crowds of students and faculty have gathered in protest on the campus' “Main Street,” Sproul Plaza.



Police isolate and disassemble tents erected in front of Sproul Hall on November 9. Photo by David Herschorn, The Daily Californian.



Student protesters used tents, a symbol of the Occupy Movement, to politicize and transform the space into Occupy Cal. Photo by Anonymous, November 9, 2011.

On November 9, a crowd of over 1,000 adopted the newly minted lexicon of occupation, set up tents on Sproul Plaza, and declared Occupy Cal underway. Suddenly, the university found itself in the company of financial hubs, civic centers, and parks and plazas the world over, when it too was re-appropriated by the sleeping bags and “mic checks” of the 99%. The Chancellor’s reaction was swift and brutal—riot police were called in from Oakland and Alameda County to break up the Sproul encampment, and they attacked students and faculty in several incidents throughout the day.

Documented moment by moment by the UC Berkeley student newspaper, the *Daily Californian*, the police beat student and faculty protesters with batons, breaking ribs; ultimately they tore down the tents and made thirty-nine arrests (The Daily Californian 2011).



The author on November 9, before being beaten by police batons. Photo by Jessica Kuo.

Clearly, the potent lexicon pioneered by the Occupy movement by no means constituted a universal language. In fact, as the Chancellor's response made obvious, Occupy Cal was lodged squarely between two dueling publics. On one side were police, agents of the state hiding behind Plexiglas visors, who took violent action to secure the campus. On the other side was an unarmed crowd defending a small circle of tents on a patch of grass. For the police, "the public space" being defended was defined by the campus administration, an open space, safe and predictable for appropriately sanctioned use. For the students, that public space was a symbolic site that served both to represent themselves, as an economic class and as a majority—the 99%—and to critique the institution and the state apparatus. At Occupy Cal and Occupy encampments everywhere, these two publics—one defined from above, the other on the ground, distinguished by its ethos of consensus and solidarity—clashed over the right to impose their own lexicon of order over a particular space. One sought to impose a system of curfews and public order, the other a language of community and justice.



Police engaged in “gentle ribbing” with batons, here striking City Planning student Logan Rockefeller Harris. Photo by Noah Berger, November 9, 2011.

Despite the violent police response, Occupy Cal re-installed itself and served as a hub of organization and expression for the full gamut of campus movements for the rest of the semester. A general strike was called and widely supported by student, faculty, and staff union governance bodies on the shocked campus (UC Berkeley Budget Crisis 2011). On November 15, Sproul Plaza teemed with art, performances, a rally, and a march to protest student debt at the Bank of America. Faculty and graduate student instructors signed up to hold “teach-outs” on the lawns of Sproul Hall, as part of Occupy Cal’s “Open University.” The day of action culminated with the annual Mario Savio Memorial Lecture, delivered by professor Robert Reich, former US Secretary of Labor (The Daily Californian 2011). A crowd of over 3,000 filled Sproul Plaza to the absolute brim to hear Reich discuss unemployment, foreclosures, student debt, and class warfare from the steps of Sproul Hall, recalling the police conflict that transpired on that very spot during Berkeley’s Free Speech movement in 1964 (Mario Savio Memorial Lecture Fund 2011). As the speech ended, the crowd chanted, “Whose University? Our University!”

This echo of history underlines the durable power of physical space as a tactical tool and a locus of resistance and expression. Occupy Cal sought to challenge the education system by redefining the university campus itself—by extracting it from the reigning narrative of fiscal logic, and representing the university instead through a language of access and equity. The aim, in short, was to *occupy* the university; to insist through physical demonstration that it be understood anew as a place of tangible

social value. In so doing, Occupy Cal translated years of resistance to rising tuition, decaying state support for higher education, and growing administrative salaries into a palpable image of the University as a space by, of, and for the people of California. In this space, local struggles were at once connected to a rising global consciousness of injustice, and brought back to the campus grounds where they are lived each day.



On November 15, students and faculty used art and dance at the “Open University” to express support for the Occupy Cal movement. Photo by Andrea Broaddus.



Massive crowd attending the Robert Reich speech in Sproul Plaza, November 15. Photo by Sean Goebel, The Daily Californian.



A stick tent constructed during the November 15 general strike to symbolize the fragility of the protesters. Photo by Andrea Broaddus.

At Wurster Hall, home to the College of Environmental Design, students of landscape architecture, city planning, and architecture embraced public space to speak this insurgent language, but infused it with particular levity. They could have remained holed up in the studio as the din of helicopters and sirens buzzed around, but instead, planners and landscape architects responded. While police wielded batons against their colleagues' bodies, Environmental Design students directed a message at their spirits, in the form of tents filled with helium balloons. It was an iconic way to summarize the new language of occupation and visibly demonstrate contested notions of public space: tents floating over the very site from which protesters had

been forcibly removed. This design intervention qua protest tactic begged the question: where exactly does the intersection between competing lexicons of order and dissent begin and end — an inch off the ground, ten feet? The answer was clear: in our minds, where there is no end in sight.



City planning students bring floating tents and “Our Space” banner to Sproul Plaza. Photo by Jessica Kuo, November 15, 2011.

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