

## Performing resistance, very real problems and the 99% (Guest blog)

This is a response to [my blog about media and protests](#) by my colleague Dr [Bart Cammaerts](#), who specialises in [research around alternative media](#), political communications and protest.

Many of the points Charlie makes resonate with the research I am currently doing. There is indeed a real problem with the performative nature of protest in the media-saturated environment we live in. Getting publicity for a particular struggle, positive or negative, is becoming the prime focus of many activists, but receiving media attention through a spectacular action (an image event such as Fathers4Justice) or through spectacular violence/damage (a dissent event such as smashing the Tory HQ) as such does not accomplish change in itself.

In a democracy social, cultural and political struggles ultimately need to be able to convince beyond the like-minded. Direct action and media attention are crucial factors in this, but it is ultimately the issues themselves and the way in which they are perceived by various constituencies and fed into the formal democratic process that is of importance to make actual change happen.

It is at this level, however, that problems arise and where the crisis of liberal democracy exposes itself bluntly. Since the 1970s radical left wing politics has disengaged from liberal democracy, first in a violent way in many European countries, after that adopting an autonomous stance and engaging in the performance of radical resistance – radical change can be accomplished, but in temporary or more permanent autonomous zones, such as the tent-camp on St-Pauls' grounds or squats that become cultural centers.

Other prevalent tactics consist in using bodies to expose the brutality of liberal democracy, eliciting police violence and thereby actively demonstrate that Western democracies can be as ruthless in crushing radical dissent as authoritarian regimes. This retreat into autonomous politics has been aggravated even further in recent years because of the often blatant refusal of liberal democracy to take into account views, demands and concerns raised by protest movements with wide levels of public support, f.e. the antiwar coalition against the war in Iraq or more recently the rise in tuition fees, the closing down of public libraries, etc. etc.

The disparate anti-greed Occupy movement, which is currently emerging world-wide, is a typical post-modern networked movement, at the moment embryonic, but there is clearly a potential or an opportunity structure as social movement scholars would say it for striking a chord that reaches beyond the likeminded. This movement is heavily reliant on social media – Stefania Milan even calls it [cloud-protesting](#) and its networked structure implies the linking-up of various and distinct struggles to create a critical mass sustained by weak horizontal organizational structures.

This also explains the lack of a clear set of demands or an agreed upon political agenda. While some within this movement would argue for the destruction or complete rejection of capitalism others are just outraged at the hold-up of 'the market' and the dire consequences of this for most citizens; their demands would more go along the lines of making capitalism subordinate to the interests of 'the people' rather than the other way round.

In this regard, it is also very fascinating to see attempts at forging class alliances again. A good illustration of this is the 99% slogan. A placard held up high during the Occupy Wallstreet protests read along the lines of: Dear one percent, we are the 99% and have been dosing off in recent years, but be aware that we're awake now!

This is of course a simplistic message and a myth as the 99% is heavily fragmented and ridden with conflicts of interest, but myths is often what is needed to get traction and have resonance. The third estate during the French revolution and the May '68 alliance between workers, peasants and students/intellectuals were also largely myths, but useful ones.

Mediation has always been crucial for such myths to take root, there needs to be a context in which such counter-discourses and the need for class-alliances make sense, tap into an already existing discontent not just amongst the activists protesting, but across the general population.

The degree to which a movement is perceived to be dangerous by the elites is usually reflected in the way

authorities and pro-establishment media represent them and position them. If we go by the [Daily Telegraph](#)'s take on the Occupy Protest, this movement is very much seen as potentially dangerous, hence the positioning of the actual activists as bad protesters:

[t]he problem with this movement, at least in the way that it's currently run – it's composed of the wrong people, with the wrong solutions to very real problems'.

And it is precisely the very real problems of casino capitalism, social deprivation, increasing wage disparities between the top and the rest and the moral indignation felt by many citizens across the world about this state of affairs which this movement taps into what makes the regime nervous and thus requiring it to stress that these people have the wrong solutions because they are the wrong people.

Who decides what a good solution is and what not? Theoretically at least this should be 'the people', i.e the 99%, however it seems that it is primarily the interests of the 1% that form the benchmark for deciding what good or bad solutions are. We can't have the markets turning against us, is often the argument to justify this, but let's remember that without the 99% there would be no market to begin with...

This post by Dr Bart Cammaerts of the Department of Media and Communications, LSE