

Book Review: Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience

by Blog Admin

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*Lacking amplification in Zuccotti Park, Occupy Wall Street protesters addressed one another by repeating and echoing speeches throughout the crowd. In this book, **W. J. T. Mitchell**, **Bernard E. Harcourt**, and **Michael Taussig** take the protesters' lead and perform their own resonant call-and-response, playing off of each other in three essays that engage the extraordinary Occupy movement that has swept across the world, examining everything from self-immolations in the Middle East to the G8 crackdown in Chicago to the many protest signs still visible worldwide. Reviewed by **Hamish Clift**.*

Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience. W.J.T. Mitchell, Bernard E. Harcourt and Michael Taussig. University of Chicago Press. May 2013.

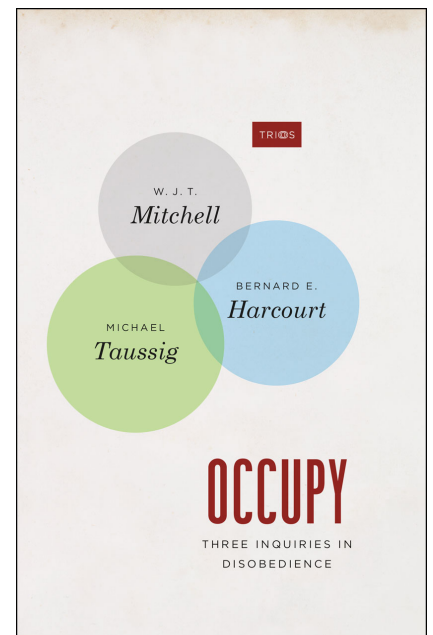
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Tunisian authorities harassed and humiliated Mohammad Bouazizi for years before an altercation on the 17th of December 2010. Bouazizi had enough and after his complaints to the governor went unheard he went to a petrol station, bought a can of petrol and went back to the governor's office. There, in the middle of the busy street, he poured the petrol over himself and set it alight. [Bouazizi's self-immolation was the catalyst to the Tunisian uprising](#) and the vanguard of the Arab Spring.

Bouazizi's occupation of public consciousness in the Middle East and North Africa inspired the Occupy movement across the rest of the world. In this troika of essays the events of 2011 are viewed through different doctrinal lenses, focused on disobedience and occupation. The preface to *Occupy* begins "If journalism is the first draft of history, the following essays might be described as a stab at a second draft." It is clear that the process of creating the essays has involved collaboration, yet each piece is discrete. [Michael Taussig's](#) essay is a narrative of the ethnographer's lived experience of Occupy Wall Street in Zuccotti Park; [Bernard E. Harcourt](#) considers the Occupy movement within the context of the nature and evolution of political disobedience; [W.J.T. Mitchell](#), the role of image and space in revolution and political change. Woven throughout the whole is a discourse on the ontology and telos of revolution and disobedience.

The first essay is a reflection of Taussig's experience in Zuccotti Park. Its stream of consciousness style is interspersed with the cries of signs seen in the park, along with quotes from philosophers, poets and "other people worth listening to". There is no distinction between the two and the author suggests, in a preface to the essay, that "I don't think you will confuse them, but it's better if you do." Taussig's fascination with the sign as an icon of the Occupy movement is clear and it is difficult to resist his enthusiasm. He explains that, in retrospect, he sees the sign as an extension of the human figure, that the sign forms both the genesis of history and representation of all that has come before.

Most of all, I was struck by the statuesque quality of many of the people holding up their handmade signs: like centaurs, half-person, half-sign.



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Taussig's observations as an ethnographer are keen and the essay is compelling, with many of the characters he speaks about appearing as photographs throughout the text – almost all holding signs. These observations of the individual contrast neatly with his observations of the mic check, or people's microphone. Local authorities banned the use of microphones in the park. As a response the occupiers developed a call and response method of public address where a speaker would have their words repeated by people further away and the address would cascade, rippling through the crowds. In this way the individual becomes a cell in a larger organism and the camaraderie and sense of belonging which was already strong is further reinforced.

Other observations are also interesting in the way that the movement differs from similar events in the Arab Spring. There is a definite materialism associated with the occupiers in Zuccotti Park, which Taussig and one of his students, Salomeya Sobko, notice and which manifests in emergent property interests. A few pages later the occupiers have heard that the mayor is going to try to evict them based on the lack of cleanliness in the park and the park is rapidly transformed by the Sanitation Group.

There are many brooms, all new. No shortage of stuff in Zuccotti Park.

Mitchell explores the meaning of revolution within the context of the events of 2011 and the role of image and art in those events. In so doing he uses a series of questions as his vehicle: what images emerged as the most memorable; why did the rhetoric of occupy emerge in so many diverse places; and is there a larger framework for understanding the shape of the events of 2011 that can be seen in their images? The essay begins by discussing the definition of revolution and uses the work of Hannah Arendt to cast the mould of the discourse. Mitchell posits that the Arab Spring was revolutionary but Occupy Wall Street was not because it had different goals from a traditional revolution – namely no regime change – but he continues to dwell on the notion, testing the position by drawing a distinction between revolutionary language and event and the idea that a revolution can be either hard or soft.

Having dealt with revolution, Mitchell turns his attention, in turn, to the trope of *occupatio*, the image, space, revolution dynamic, and the arts of occupation. He draws on Arendt, Slavoj Žižek and Martin Heidigger, among many others, and canvasses a rich array of ideas to answer the questions. Never before have I filled the margins of a book like I have in Mitchell's essay. One of my favourite lines comes when Mitchell discusses the iconography of the occupy movement, which embraced nonsoveriegnity and anonymity: "When faces did occur, they were of indefinitely repeatable masks, such as the grinning visage of Guy Fawkes, a singularly awkward and inappropriate icon of a nonviolent revolution."

Occupy is a difficult book to review. The subject is complex and important and each of the authors has approached it from quite different routes. But while the difference between each of the essays is stark, it creates a strong sense of the pastiche which is the Occupy movement. Taussig's gonzo-academic narrative, Harcourt's broad but incisive analysis and Mitchell's rich criticism combine to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The coalescence of the authors' thought upon the theme, in what approaches a kind of postmodern meta-reference, comes to represent an ontology of the movement. *Occupy* is a good second draft of a still breathing epoch. As the rage of protesters in Tahrir Square keeps Mohammad Morsi in the custody of the Egyptian Army and as protesters are abused and assaulted in Taksim, disobedience occupies an ever important political space.

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