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Reclaiming democracy in the square: Two years on from Occupy London

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With the anniversary of Occupy London approaching, **Armine Ishkanian** explores how social movements have developed and the impact they have had on society and politics. The issues and problems which brought people

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into the streets and squares in the first place, whether in London, Cairo, Istanbul, Rio or Athens, have not been adequately addressed let alone resolved. An [upcoming event](#) at the LSE will further explore and interpret pro-democracy and protest movements.

October 15th will mark the two year anniversary of Occupy London. As that date approaches, many will ask, what was the impact of Occupy London and of the many other mobilizations that emerged in 2011? In the report, [Reclaiming Democracy in the Square?: Interpreting the Movements of 2011-2012](#) we consider what happened not only in the squares, but more importantly how the movements that emerged in 2011-2012 have developed and transformed beyond the squares and what impact they have had on political, economic and social developments in their respective societies. The protests over the past three years have raised awareness and engendered greater public awareness of and debate around a range of issues including inequality, corruption, tax justice, debt, as well as specific welfare policies adopted by governments.

Many now recognise that 2011 was the peak year of civil unrest, protest and movements for democracy and against austerity across the globe. We set out to provide a fresh and informed perspective on these movements. The research consisted of two inter-connected approaches. The first method was a global survey of media reports and self-published materials about movements. The second method was field research in five cities where there had been protests: Athens, Cairo, London, Moscow and Yerevan. In addition to examining what can be called paradigmatic cases of each type (e.g., Cairo as the typical example of a pro-democracy movement and Athens as the typical example of an anti-austerity movement) we wanted to examine other lesser known cases (e.g., Yerevan, Moscow).

We began by examining the following:

1. The shared commonalities as well as the divergences and different trajectories and demands of the movements.
2. The generational aspect of the mobilizations.
3. The relationship of movements with other actors including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, and political parties, and their transnational relations.

Demands: democracy, social justice and rule of law

Across the globe activists expressed concern with democracy, and a widespread and strongly worded feeling that elections alone are a very insufficient form of democracy. Accountability of civil servants and politicians, and the rule of law were very often mentioned as a necessary and endangered element of democracy. At times this was equated with the impunity of economic and political elites who flouted the law, but equally, activists criticised the hold of corporate elites over the state, and the resulting inequality and lack of basic services, identifying these as a threat to democracy. Demands for social justice were also commonly shared:

- First, that there should be less inequality;
- Second, that the state should not collude in inequality but protect the underprivileged;

- Third, when formulated more concretely, that it should provide access to basic social services.

Generational element

We often heard about the 'lost' or 'precarious' generation that is growing up in a neoliberal environment where neither work nor public services could be taken for granted. And indeed we found that there is a generational aspect to the protests in that young, middle class educated people are at the core of the protests. Driven by anger, indignation, and shattered expectations young people are mobilising and taking their protests to the streets.

But young people were not the only ones that are affected by austerity policies and they were not the only ones protesting in the squares. There was also an element everywhere of middle-aged or elderly 'ordinary citizens' joining the protests, and taking an active but untraditional interest in politics.

Squares and beyond

The experience of spending multiple days together in an encampment or square occupation was regarded by many activists as a special utopian time of discussion, mutual respect and solidarity between people with very different outlooks. While the mainstream media was also fascinated by the camps, a notable aspect revealed by the global survey was the media's focus on violence. When protests were peaceful, they often failed to make the pages and the reporting on the protest movements stops once the movements are evicted or leave the square.

Yet as we discovered, for many movements, this period after the square was very important in taking the struggle and the issues to the local communities and neighbourhoods. For instance, following the eviction of the Occupy camp in February 2012, members of Occupy London created different working groups that continue to meet on a regular basis. In September 2012, some Occupy activists and squatters helped the local community in Barnet to take control over Friern Barnet Library which had been closed by Barnet Council. Eventually the local community was granted permission by a court to keep the library open. This victory came about due to a symbiotic relationship and alliance between the Occupy activists and the local community. Beginning in September 2013, a new alliance of Barnet residents and Occupy activists is now focused on [saving a much-loved community pub in Barnet](#).

Relations with formal civil society

One of the questions which interested us is the relationship of these movements with more institutionalised civil society actors or political parties and whether such relations are necessary for scaling up impact. Across all settings, there was agreement that NGOs had not been involved in the organisation of protests and camps, and there was much criticism of NGOs, who were seen as being too close to the state, market-oriented in their way of working, and in some contexts corrupt. At the same time, there was a recognition that support from NGOs, or at least from people working in NGOs, came with valuable skills and resources.

Official trade unions were even less relied upon as they were seen as bureaucratised and tamed. Although there are some local differences, there has generally not been a clear link between the movements and (opposition) political parties. This is unsurprising since it was disaffection with the entire political system, not just with the government of the day that drove people into the street in the first place. Moreover, the lack of connection to formal civil society actors as well as political parties was one of the reasons why people took to the streets and squares in the first place.

While this lack of connection is understandable, it also raises certain dilemmas for groups seeking to have a broader policy or political impact. In particular, given the more structured and hierarchical model on which

political parties and trade unions are organised, they often find engaging with leaderless grassroots movements to be “complicated”. As one trade union activist we interviewed said:

Our relationship with Occupy has been complicated...They have less of a tactical blueprint that you can support and not much of a strategy. Whilst I share the anti-globalization and anti-bank sympathies, just occupying the space at St. Paul's didn't seem to have a purpose. (London, 8 May 2013).

But engagement is possible. We found that it was more likely for such alliances to emerge when there were clearly formulated and targeted demands rather than the broader critiques of the capitalist system and globalization.

Impact

Many questions remain about the broader or longer term impact and achievements of the protest movements of 2011 – 2012. The situation in many of the countries discussed in this report is still in a period of transformation and it remains to be seen how events will develop. In the early summer of 2013, we also observed the emergence of new sites of protests in Brazil, Bulgaria, and Turkey.

It is important to keep in mind that the issues and problems which brought people into the streets and squares in the first place, whether in London, Cairo, Istanbul, Rio or Athens have not been adequately addressed let alone resolved. The anger and indignation with the lack of democracy and social justice as well as the persistent corruption and inequality which fuelled the initial demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 remain.

Governments have at times ignored the demands of protestors, instead moving ahead with deep public spending cuts and further austerity measures, such as in the UK and Greece. More worryingly, some governments, such as in Egypt or Russia, have introduced political forms of repression and even police violence in order to suppress or curtail protests. At the same time it is clear that the movements we have described are far from ephemeral, leading us to expect more mobilisation and conflict in the coming years.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Dr Armine Ishkanian is a Lecturer in NGOs and Development in the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. She is the author of *Democracy Building and Civil Society in post-Soviet Armenia* (Routledge 2008) and co-editor of *The Big Society: A New Agenda for Social Welfare* (Edward Elgar 2012). The project that forms the basis for this article was funded by a grant from the Robert Bosch Stiftung.



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1. [Britain and Greece: 40 years ago](#)
2. [Five minutes with Colin Crouch: “A post-democratic society is one that continues to have and to use all the institutions of democracy, but in which they increasingly become a formal shell”](#)

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2 Responses to *Reclaiming democracy in the square: Two years on from Occupy London*



Ralph Musgrave says:

October 9, 2013 at 12:01 pm

The so called “Christian” church’s attitude to the Occupy movement was a disgrace. I’m not religious, but Jesus overturned the money-changers’ tables situated in churches. Quite right.

In contrast, the attitude of our 21st century so called “Christian” church was utterly hypocritical and two-faced. They eventually banned the “occupiers” from St Paul’s, as I understand it, for “health and safety” reasons. Pathetic. They could perfectly well have erected barriers and kept the occupiers separate from those wishing to visit St Pauls.

I.e. our 21st century church eventually sided with the rich, the powerful – i.e. the “establishment”, which is what the church nearly always does. The church sided with the aristocracy, not the peasants before the French Revolution. Plus ca change.

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