

these struggles, which must rather be constructed as a project of political articulation. This is the task of communist organization. The important radical formations of the future will be those that bring to this old task a new fusion of networked and terrestrial connection to actualize the aspiration emblazoned on the banner carried at the Oakland general strike: 'Occupy Everywhere: Death to Capitalism'.

### Notes

1. Harry Cleaver, 'The Zapatistas and the Electronic Fabric of Struggle', <https://webpace.utexas.edu/hcleaver/www/zaps.html>, 1995.
2. David McNally, *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance*, PM Press, Oakland CA, 2011.
3. Alex Callinicos, panel discussion at 'Critical Refusals' conference, Pennsylvania State University, Philadelphia, 27 October 2011.

# Ideas are bulletproof

## Andy Merrifield

**W**ith the emergence of the worldwide 'Occupy' movement, at last there seems something we can write home about, something we can celebrate, salute, support. We can even don the mask ourselves, join in, grin that mischievous and devilish Guy Fawkes grin and affirm our own phantom-faced defiance of big money and big business. Behind the disguise, behind that anonymity, demonstrators everywhere have revealed their true identity, and revealed their numbers: 'We are the 99 per cent'. *Indignados* have shown to the world that masses of people share the same sense of frustration and rage: enough is enough. 'V' is for Vengeance.<sup>1</sup>

Like a lot of urbanists, I've also been fascinated by what this means for urban politics. From Tahrir Square to Plaza del Sol, from Syntagma Square to Tottenham's streets, from Zuccotti Park to St Paul's Cathedral, the city has seemingly become the critical zone in which new forms of 'occupational' protest unfold. 'Right to the city' or something else? If something else, what else? The global sway of Wall Street and City of London decision-makers has been called into question, contested, by collective bodies in the public realm; this at a time when an inexorable shift of the human population into urban agglomerations has occurred and when the city region is now viewed as the fundamental unit of economic development and potential environmental collapse. The occupations are politically stimulating, yet theoretically tricky to unravel, especially if one wears an urban cap at the same time as a Guy Fawkes mask.

Towards the end of his life, one of our greatest urbanists, Henri Lefebvre, expressed a desire that urban dweller and citizen embrace one another again in a space that they would collectively invent. (Lefebvre was a chip off the old Marxist bloc(k): 'Are you an anarchist or Marxist?' a perplexed student asked him in the 1970s. 'A Marxist, of course', the septuagenarian prof replied, 'so that one day we can all become anarchists.') In the 1980s, when Lefebvre tried to update his thesis on 'the right to the city', first set out in the late 1960s, he implied it was nothing less than a 'revolutionary conception of citizenship'. Typically, Lefebvre never told us what he meant by this. Yet

we might infer that it can only ever be a citizenship in which territoriality is something broader and narrower than both ‘city’ and ‘nationality’; a citizen of the block, of the neighbourhood, somehow needs to become a citizen of the world, a universal citizen rooted in place, encountering fellow citizens across the corridor and at the other end of the planet. This kind of citizenship is one in which perception replaces passport, and horizon becomes just as important as habitat. This perception is simultaneously in place and in space, offline somewhere local, and online somewhere planetary, somewhere virtual. How the two realms come together, how perception gives rise to a singular political perception, is where the politics of the encounter comes into its own.

The politics of the encounter hinges upon another conception of urban centrality. Centrality isn’t necessarily about being at the centre of things; it doesn’t imply some absolute centre, geographically located in absolute space, but is a locus of actions that attract and repel, that structure and organize a social space, that define the urban, like the way Zuccotti Park has helped define the trajectory of Manhattan and world radical politics. Centrality isn’t understood in the way Lefebvre himself once defined it in *The Right to the City*, as an absolute centre of a city that needs taking back, like the Communards reclaiming central Paris; urban politics can’t invoke that model any more. Instead, centrality is movable, always relative, never fixed, always in a state of constant mobilization and negotiation. It is the nemesis of centralization with its totalizing mission of domination and control. Centrality is the culmination of encounters, a new capacity for concentration, a tipping point, mediated by social media, which helps marginality centre itself, helps it do so horizontally. At that point, an encounter between people becomes an encounter between citizens who no longer ask for their rights, for the rights of man, for the right to the city, for human rights. Citizens meeting one another in ‘occupied’ global–urban space make no rights claims, posit no empty signifiers. They don’t even speak – not in the conventional sense of the term; they just do, just act, affirm themselves as a group, as a collectivity, as a ‘general assembly’, wanting to take back that which has been dispossessed. They don’t plead or ask any interlocutor for anything abstract, for they have little expectation of any rights, and don’t want any rights granted. If they say anything, citizens of the encounter talk a language that the group has only just collectively invented.

### **Just-in-time**

At stake here, as I have argued elsewhere, isn’t ‘the right to the city’, but the Joycean ‘Here Comes Everybody’ (HCE) – the ‘normative letters’, as Joyce puts it in *Finnegans Wake*, of a universal dreaming collective.<sup>2</sup> This HCE is collectively conscious of an enemy, of a ruling class that so evidently props up an undemocratic system. It is expressive of an affinity politics, of associative ties and modes of solidarity latent within everyday life. Citizens here aren’t so much concerned with seizing power as regaining control over their own lives. Nor are they necessarily conscious of belonging to any class. All want to disengage from the market ‘rationality’ of neoliberalism; all want to confront a small minority of the world’s population who commandeer global finance and global governance. Citizens in the encounter comprise disparate groups of people who have an uncanny knack of organizing themselves without organizers, of engineering ‘smart spontaneity’, of creating encounters in the heat of the moment and in the heat of the movement. Like capitalist production they arrange rendezvous just in time. Twitter and Facebook, mobile phones and SMS messaging have collapsed space and diminished the time of organizing, of rounding up troops or shifting them elsewhere, of supplying reinforcements when and where needed, of dodging heavy police presences. Spontaneous street assembly can be managed and orchestrated – media-staged, as it were; a newly forming, looser coterie of concerned citizens, spanning the globe and dialoguing across borders and barriers, all find collective lingua franca in an activism

that comes home to roost in bites as well as bytes. They are creating group commonality because of a taking hold of bodies and minds in a certain space, face to face through ‘strong-tie’ offline activism, but also through online ‘weak-tie’ association.

The ‘urban’ (like Lefebvre, I prefer ‘urban’ to ‘city’) is nothing in itself, has no spatial existence outside these dynamic social relations, outside this coming together of people, this singularity sharing its passions and affirming its hopes. It is not in space that these people act: people become space by acting. So long as human beings can come together, so long as separation can be resisted, there is always a possibility



of encounters between people. The potential progressive future of the urban resides precisely in its ability to promote encounters. In *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre uses a beautiful turn of phrase: ‘the urban consolidates’ (*l’urbain rassemble*). The urban brings everything together, and transforms everything in that coming together: not only capital and goods, but also people and information, activity and conflict, confrontation and cooperation. The urban concentrates things, intensifies, creates simultaneity and difference, creates difference where no awareness of difference existed; ditto what was once distinct and isolated becomes conscious of its own universal-

ity in that particularity. The urban consolidates: it is both particle and wave, flow and thing; its own random uncertainty principle that prevails in everyday life. Yet if we follow Lefebvre’s own premise about urban society, the more urbanization continues to carpet over the whole world, the more encounters will likely take place, and the more a politics of the encounter will punctuate and define our urban landscape of the future.

We’ve witnessed such collective bonding, such collective occupation, on the streets and in the squares of Tunis, Cairo, Athens, Madrid, Manhattan, Oakland, Los Angeles, Rome, Stockholm, Lisbon, Sarajevo, Hong Kong, Berlin, Sydney and London (the list is in no way exhaustive). Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators have organized themselves without either organizations or leaders, and an online global ‘conversation’ has grown at the same time as offline street assemblies have taken hold, shaped up. While these encounters have unfolded in the heart of ‘the city’, the stakes of protest aren’t about the city per se, but about democracy in conditions of capitalist crisis, something vaster and simpler than the city as we once knew it (hence the preference for ‘urban’). Participants have simultaneously acted and reacted, been both affected and affecting; joy and celebration, tenderness and abandon, online and offline activism, all find structuring, all somehow find definition. ‘The beauty of this formula’, went one recent Occupy Wall Street statement, ‘and what makes this novel tactic exciting, is its pragmatic simplicity. We talk to each other in various physical gatherings and through virtual people’s assemblies ... we zero in on what ... would propel us toward the radical democracy of the future.’ The stake may not be strictly ‘city’; yet, perhaps, it is something about the staging of urban society that enables this declaration to be made, that permits and engenders such a definition, a definition in which people collectively can now publicly define themselves in front of the whole world.

So, donned in Guy Fawkes mask and urban cap (beret? slouch hat? baseball cap? hood?), the politics of the encounter in the end boils down to ‘mob analysis’. The term isn’t mine, it’s science-fiction godfather Isaac Asimov’s; neither is it meant to be pejorative. In his *Foundation* series of novels, Asimov presents ‘mob analysis’ as another word for psychohistory. 22,500 years into the future, psychohistory is the brainchild of Asimov’s central protagonist, the mathematician Hari Seldon, who formulates

psychohistory to predict the future in statistical fashion. For Asimov, the concept of psychohistory is modelled on the kinetic theory of gases. Molecules making up gases move about in absolutely random fashion, in any direction, in three dimensions and at a wide range of speeds. Nobody can predict the behaviour of a single molecule. Yet, as a mass of molecules, as gases, you can somehow describe what the motions would be on average, and from there work out the gas laws with a very high degree of predictability. Asimov applied this notion to human beings. (In Asimov's *Foundation* saga, there is no alien presence, no non-human life, save for humanly-made robots: his vision of the universe is all the more interesting because it is all-too-human.) All of us have free will, all of us as individuals exhibit behaviour and act in ways that defy predictability. Still, for vast numbers of people, for diverse societies, for 'mobs' of people, Asimov's Seldon suggests that some sort of predictability is possible, like it is for gases. Thus psychohistory is 'mob analysis', predicting mob behaviour as intruding, intervening in historical contingency. The politics of mobs as akin to the kinetic theory of gases has considerable salience because it suggests something about the prospect of group encounters intervening in the historical-geographical logic of contemporary capitalism. But here, perhaps, it's not so much psychohistory as psychogeography (in a nod to the Situationists) that's akin to mob analysis, implying that any act of centralizing human behaviour, any human agglomeration, will likely create at a certain time, and especially in a certain space, a gathering of people that resembles a gathering of gases, a certain coming together of movement and stasis, of particle and wave. And this encounter possesses its own kinetic energy; sometimes negative energy, like indiscriminate rioting (we know about that one), but also positive energy, its own Brownian motion, perhaps generating an energy that's enough to alter the course of history (and geography).

Should such an encounter really take hold, really gel, the social configuration would, this suggests, be a kind of political superstring theory realizing itself, a transformative conjoining around a collective boson. Like particle physicists today, we know, theoretically and mathematically from our radical hypotheses, that this collective reality exists, even if we have never yet witnessed it empirically. We are 99 per cent sure that the figures stack up, that those in the boson will be the 99 per cent. If that ever happens – when it happens – we might see before our eyes a beautiful collideorscape (the portmanteau is Joyce's, again from *Finnegans Wake*), a 'collision and escape', a coming together, a sort of kaleidoscope, a passage into another political reality.

What might this collideorscape resemble? The imagery, the pictorial representation of resistance, the sight of a politics of the encounter unfolding in our mind's eye, might come from abstract expressionism, from Jackson Pollock, and his 1950s' canvas 'Number 32', which currently hangs in Dusseldorf's Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen museum. Pollock's patterning depicts the very act of fusion. Only two colours make up 'Number 32': a light tan-brown over which are splattered skeins of jet black swirls. One is struck by the energy that radiates from this composition; if you verge too close, it sucks you into its spiralling vortex. Energy enters via thin whorls and curves, thin threads of spontaneous black. Yet there are points of convergence, snowflakes and dendrites, where the black paint thickens and is nodal, highly charged. Modest inputs spiralling inwards seem, at these points of fusion, about to release enormous outputs, energy that pushes outwards, a diffusion unleashing a quantity–quality reaction, a critical mass of power. They kindle radical eruptions not random explosions, volcanic happenings rather than unannounced anarchy, because here there is underlying regularity, some inner structuring order. For in this imagery we glimpse not only radical fractals, but also the physicists' concept of a wormhole coming to life, illusive shortcuts, tiny trails towards liberation.

Wormholes create new regions of urban space, blaze new spatial territories, a new political space–time dimension that secretly links, makes a bridge, or subterranean

tunnel, between social movements everywhere. Wormholes complete the encounter, transmit messenger particles that unite all struggles across the planet. Charged particles transmit negative, repulsive energy, frequently saying to other particles ‘move apart’; yet every particle also has an opposite charge, has powers of attractions that say ‘come together’. In our contemporary, ever-expanding urban universe, little loops of energy generate incredible force; they literally make the world go around, light it up with electricity. It’s time, perhaps, for political struggles of the type exemplified in urban occupations to energize this new planetary charge, and convert it into unprecedented cosmic singularity – into our own concrete expressionism. Behind the mask lies more than flesh. Behind the mask lies an idea, and that idea circulates though the wormhole. There, it really is bulletproof.

## Notes

1. The Guy Fawkes mask donned by the protesters is taken from the revolutionary hero of David Lloyd and Alan Moore’s graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, set in a dystopian future Britain, and the subsequent 2006 film directed by James McTeigue. My title is also an allusion to this work.
2. See Andy Merrifield, ‘Crowd Politics, or, “Here Comes Everybuddy”’, *New Left Review* 71, September/October 2011, pp. 103–14.

# The Chilean winter

## Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott

Since the beginning of 2011, student mobilizations in Chile have occupied the centre of public debate. On the one hand, most of the population, along with most of the political parties currently opposed to Sebastián Piñera’s government, agree on the crisis of secondary and higher education in a country that has been widely praised for fostering democratization and economic prosperity after the dark decades of Pinochet’s dictatorship (1973–89). On the other hand, there seems to be little agreement on what this crisis actually means, and even the government recognizes the necessity for substantial changes in the relationship between the state and the general system of education. At the same time, this new series of protests complements and further radicalizes those that took place in 2006, protests called the ‘Penguin Revolution’ with reference to the secondary students who played a crucial role in the demonstrations. What appears to be new in the present conjuncture is the involvement of students from both secondary and post-secondary institutions, public and private. The breadth and scale of participation are an indication of the nature of the crisis.

The current cycle of protests began in April 2011, when the CONFECH (Chile’s confederation of university students) decided to strike, demanding improvements in the government’s financial plans and changes to the distribution of scholarships, social benefits and transportation passes. CONFECH represents students from traditional universities, of which FEUC (Students’ Federation of the Catholic University of Chile) and FECH (Students’ Federation of University of Chile) are the most important, along with FEC, from the University of Concepción, in the south of the country. Very quickly many other universities and professional institutes got involved, along with secondary students from both private and public sectors; CONFECH actions were relayed by protests and