

Populism and Class Politics: A Conversation with Emily Welty on the Occupy Wall Street Movement

Ajay Gudavarthy
Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha
Kazi Nazrul University, India

Abstract: *The book Occupying Political Science: The Occupy Wall Street Movement from New York to the World (2013) came out on the heels of the Occupy movement. The four editors of this book – Emily Welty, Christopher Malone, Matthew Bolton, Meghana Nayak – were all author-participants of the movement. The book thus features their firsthand account of the event(s) as scholar-activists. Both Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou have written about Occupy the Wall Street (OWS) pinning hopes for possible revolutionary openings through the uprising, and in a similar vein this book characterizes OWS as the sudden irruption of singularity, as the heterochronos, or as a kairos moment of new beginnings. As political scientists, however, the editors seem to have refrained from capturing OWS through any preexisting theoretical lens as the movement itself posed a daunting challenge to a priori political notions or conceptions. In the words of the editors, the book describes the ‘palimpsestic’ nature of the movement; it has multiple layers, sources, and trajectories of inspiration as well as grievances of its participants. In mid-2018, Ajay Gudavarthy met with one of the book’s editors – Emily Welty – who teaches in Pace University, New York. Ajay conducted most of the interview for Kairos: A Journal of Critical Symposium. An earlier dialogue with the book began through Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha’s review in the Journal of Social Movement Studies. Anindya has continued this conversation with Emily since after.*

Keywords: Occupy Wall Street Movement, Zuccotti Park, Capitalism, New Social Movements

I

Do Structures Matter Anymore?

Ajay Gudavarthy (AG): One of the first things I want to discuss is that you make this point about ‘inter-textual interventions’ in the entire discourse of the

Occupy movement, you use this phrase in your book, right? So without a totalizing final explanation, do you think it refers to the fact that structures – you also say it's not about structures and structural analysis anymore – are mediated and hence you take a process-oriented approach? Or would you say, you want to eschew structures altogether, for they no longer explain movements like Occupy?

Emily Welty (EW): Yes, I think one of the things that made Occupy look different, and I am going to speak specifically for a North American context. Our way of looking at social movements before Occupy in a North American context was a very hierarchical, genealogy oriented, concerning with issues like “who is the leader, how do we follow the specific examples that have come before”, etc. One of the things that struck me while looking at Occupy was that it wasn't clinging to those traditions. It was self-aware about it, as other civil rights movements were, such as the LGBTQ mobilizations. But it wasn't beholden to it. So to understand things that were working within those traditions, we used the phrase “palimpsest” to mean there are layers upon layers in these movements, if you scratch beneath the surface then traces of those traditions could be located but that led to innovations around the structure. It led to questions like “what is structure, why do we need it, do we need it?” And then there were efforts to go deeper around the process. So I don't think that Occupy was saying “throw out structure”, but one of the really challenging things about researching Occupy, being part of Occupy, was that it meant different things to different people, that there wasn't a settled narrative. And it is interesting for you to study it now. We all had time to reflect on it and think about how it changed while at the same time when it was happening we had different experiences. That's true in every social movement in a sense. It was extremely true for Occupy, for people's motivations, their involvement, and how they understood it in different contexts. One of the things with this book was that we were criticized for its very New York-centric depiction. So for many people who occupied in other parts of America, it's not an accurate depiction of what Occupy was, and I think we try to make this point that by putting New York city in centre, we need to be very clear of what we were talking about: we were talking about Occupy as experienced in New York city. I think also many people in Occupy were aware of the ways in which New York city is not just a physical reality, economic reality, or political one but also a discursive one, in which there are lots of messages and narratives about the city itself which is a kind of symbol for economic mobility, class mobility and of success. In some ways, it is a symbol of urbanism in the US. When people talk about living in a city, they often think about New York. So I think occupy was actively engaging with a discursive reality and trying to challenge certain discourses that framed the city as a kind of playground for the rich (one percent). They were trying to highlight and amplify other stories about the city, other experiences of the New Yorkers and highlight the stories of the 99

percent. To bring in light these discourses of the city they drew on older narratives of downtown New York. Trying to remember History of anti-slavery movements in the city – history of revolution that started in some ways – many people realized that there is an alternative history of New York as a common space. These are stories that they were trying to tell about themselves through their activism, by placing themselves in spaces, by holding banners, by tweeting, by kind of talking to media in a very situated way.

AG: So do you think that they had an understanding about the question of economic justice. Was it a deeper way of understanding that or was it just rhetorical or do you think it had some political economy understanding to it? How did it appear when you talked to activists, because there were different kinds of people gathered there? It is a reductive thing to throw everyone under the same banner but was there a deeper and genuine political economic understanding, were the participants of Occupy actually believing in what they were doing, or was it just a rhetorical way of making a point?

EW: I think it's different in different places. I do think it raised a question of class in acute ways. Whether you were sleeping in the parks or coming to it every day, whether you are there as an activist or as a researcher, it raised the question of class. There were interesting processes happening – waving, sometimes people were honking; sometimes wealthy people looking down at us from their rich balconies and kind of observing what was going on. I think it was more than a rhetorical device: I think the analysis varied, there were people in the park for securing housing and who needed basic benefits that occupy was providing – food, medical help, and shelter. I don't know if they knew sophisticated political economy analysis, but they were living that reality in the city, they were encountering economics. For a lot of people, I would include myself in that category, for whom the experience was self-reflexive, and we experienced Occupy both as researchers and activist subjects. Occupy made me think about that. We thought about the way we had a lot of shame around the concept of debt in US society. How much this debt structure is constraining our choices, what do we think it is constraining. The fact that I took student loan is causing shame, which is material reality for most people here. Then you had groups of people in Occupy who had sophisticated analysis of economy. There were other issues too, such as decolonizing Palestine, and so many other things under the common umbrella wrestling for a narrative. It often occurred along lines of solidarity, for example Egyptian activists came and put on their flag. So that's a message; conversation(s) were happening around challenging systems. So you got some interesting trends but then again the conversation would invariably return to economics to talk about marginalization. I think Occupy was more ideologically diverse; conversations were very dispersed and the movement wasn't really about keeping people together; it acknowledged the

open conflicts within the movement and had aired that difference very publicly and was not afraid of doing so.

AG: So the sentiments were there out in the open?

EW: Right there in the open. Very much in the park, literally in the open for anyone to walk through and hear, some observers saw that as chaotic. What was so interesting about Occupy is that it did not even have a strong class base and no strong contingent of Marxist and socialist left were involved in the show. There were anarchists and social democrats and many others and you had a truly broad spectrum of ideas coming together in such a gathering that impacted the discussion on economic justice and other related issues. I think one of the interesting dimensions of it was that the groups that had ideological positions came to the park for different issues. Not all of them were economic, even though that was the core focus of the conversation. And many social democrats joined the occupy because they were angry about the way the Occupy was treated by the police. For many of them it was more a matter of conversation on right to assembly, right to free speech, etc. Occupy also had the tendency to politicize your position, while walking in the park, people would ask you who you are and in subsequent conversations they would inquire how much debt you had, or what's your salary, etc. These are conversation that don't happen in polite terms in the US.

AG: Is there an amount of stigma attached to it?

EW: Yes.

AG: So my point is, those activists who were involved, did they actually believe that something would change or did they believe it more of putting it out in the open to people to know? Did they believe in a concrete end to be achieved by the movement, whether self-conscious or not? Or did they think let's first do it and then we shall see the outcome?

EW: I think when I hear your question, it sounds like change is being positioned that happens in the future. And I think the experience of Occupy was that we are changing things by occupying the space. Yes, there are prefigurative ways that we can imagine the whole world being different by simply claiming this space. Change is happening by our encounter, by reclaiming the space; it isn't something that is pushed into a future state. I also think there is a lot of pressure to have political goals and to have that sort of tangible change in mind; a lot of pressure and a lot of expectations. There were views that the real measure of Occupy would be if we could have a candidate to run for a position of power to bring those changes we were asking for. I think there wasn't a lot of momentum for that in the movement.

II

Was There a Civil Political Divide?

AG: So was there some kind of an endemic divide? This is an experience of social movements in India, which become socially acceptable, but not necessarily accepted as a political thing. For example, anti-corruption mobilization is fine as long as it is a social issue but it doesn't actually succeed when you take it into electoral politics. Generally, the middle class which is involved in these kind of decisions also believe that politics in itself is a dirty game. Does this also apply to Occupy – what was its equation with electoral politics? Was there a civil-political divide?

EW: I think it was diverse and I think in one of the chapters of our book we talked about this conflict within Occupy between people who really wanted to take things to the political system and others who saw Occupy as a piece of spectacle to draw attention to some issues and for many they saw it as a direct kind of demonstration of mutual and collective gathering, a kind of social service; there was a kitchen in the park that was providing real food to more than a thousand people a day; and they were providing health care, lending money and social support. Also, the Occupy project raised money to buy loans which were given to people by lenders, so that's direct activity. There were some who wanted to move into electoral politics and did something. It did have an impact on electoral politics here in the city. I think it changed the way people think about class. There were prefigurative political discussions and demands that saw the state as irrelevant and there were demands to create an alternative system.

III

Was it a No-Demand Movement?

AG: So how does that take us to the issue that there was “no single demand”. I think this was a huge thing and existing literature on Occupy is divided on that. Some who believe, and I think your book also comes within that category, that this idea of having no single demand was a kind of strategy in itself. Or was it a strategic move simply to hold heterogeneous groups together? And there might be a conflict of opinion on this.

EW: I think the way I have come to talk about Occupy is that it was not leaderless it was leader-full, it's not demandless, it's demand-full, yes we didn't have one demand, we didn't articulate a strategy of ten things that we wanted to. That didn't mean that we didn't want things. I think it's a mistake to say that “oh they didn't know what they want” as though we were so foolish, and I think there have been (such) caricatures about Occupy. I know that there were internal mistakes but it's also hard to write about it. We didn't present a

narrative for journalists to summarize in six easy paragraphs and that's being that and that's inconvenient for them, but I don't think there was anything disorganized about it. I think what was deeply involved into the DNA of Occupy was this alternative critical ideology that defies the conventional idea that it's a state, it's a political party that comes up with a platform. Occupy practiced people living in the fullness of human life interacting with each other and their demands were different. They offered things to each other mutually; they imagined alternative ways of being humane and they tried to make this into political ideology, and that brought them into greater positioning, especially the anarchists who were coherent on this alternative way of imagining everything from the beginning. It was the experience of Occupy that made people think more imaginatively about what it means to be part of a social movement and have the experience of being part of it. I think there were some people who got frustrated and who had urgent demands; they had political expectations that they wanted Occupy to articulate for them. So I am sympathetic to that point of yours but at the same time Occupy also said we are not a social movement that has to do everything. I think there were people within Occupy who sophisticatedly drew on the idea of Deleuze and Guattari, and argued that a movement doesn't have to be seen as a climax, in the sense that it doesn't have to have a list of things – the checklist. In some ways, journalists from elite media organizations want that so that they can be asking what's your list. Occupy wanted people in government, in media, in political parties to think not to answer but to question, not to offer easy answers to the external observers who want to classify things that refused to be classified.

AG: But it also signifies that things were conscious, not wanting to make actors as subject matter. They didn't want a gaze on actors. Do you think Occupy was trying to avoid the gaze and defuse it instead? It didn't matter who you were, as long as you came to the park. It didn't matter what demands you had, as long as you were critical, frustrated, angry. It didn't expect you to have a pointed or clear understanding as to why you were unhappy?

EW: I think it was really true. I think what we said so far – I speak for myself – my own experience as a social scientist is that there were people who were there, and when you ask why they were there, they would say “I am here due to music”. It might not be a political or social answer, but an easy answer. They might be interested in conversation so that a critique might open, people would walk in and come for lots of different settings. They didn't have to sign for principles or specific demands.

AG: Part of the narrative of my previous interviews with participants – a majority of them being youth and first time political actors – is that they were not very politically conscious. They were whites and were first time on the

street to do anything like this. They didn't know how to go about it. How would you react?

EW: I totally disagree with it. It's interesting for you to think about, as a researcher, how people positioned themselves, but there is a real difference in the way you and I talk about it. I talk about Occupy as "we" and you only talk about it as "they". It has to be related; whether you saw Occupy as an observer, critic or as part of Occupy. I will find it so shocking if somebody, as part of Occupy, used that "we" and say "we were first time actors", or "we were young and clueless" etc., I would not agree with. I was shocked to see how inter-generational it was. Often you have people who talk about it how organizing happened during the Vietnam War. A lot of anarchists then were brand new 20-years-olds; they were first politically sensitized, and were careful thinkers who have been involved in multiple social movements.

AG: Was there more than a racial composition?

EW: Yes we have said that in our analysis in the book. We were specifically looking at things through intersectionality, race, class and gender.

AG: Would you say most of those who were critical were trying to situate Occupy in terms of a study of old social movements, and that their refusal to study the movement for what it is also slips into criticism that is often directed at first-timer activists, i.e. they were not politically conscious?

EW: Yes. I would say I study non-violent movements myself, I got experienced myself both as a participant and as an observer, that's the space I am coming from. I am aware of the ways other social movement have been viewed and written about. I feel more people got it wrong. Even journalists I liked and trusted got it wrong when they were reporting it. A lot of journalists came to Occupy expecting to see chaos, disorganization, no demands, no leaders – and that's what they saw – because they already expected and decided this to be happening. I found that very frustrating; I am as possessive of Occupy because it was happening so close here. We would come to work by way of Occupy, we would come to the city, go to the park, come from work, and go back to the park afterwards; it felt like it belonged to me in an organic way. I thought of myself as part of it, to see people dropping it – there was a lot of mocking of it – that's somehow all drummers are drumming it. A lot of caricatures around. And I just found it really surprising the way Occupy was written about. I wish somebody several years on would gaze onto Occupy and the lived experience of it. It is very frustrating. This division of navigation of the observer and the participant. I consider myself a part of Occupy. I was learning from people within Occupy. I would make a point that 99 percent includes everyone who isn't making 50,000 dollars per year. 99 percent is encompassing a lot of

people. Reporters would come to me and interrogate sometimes “why are you wearing a suit” (as I used to go there every day on my way back from work)? Sometimes journalists were kind of annoyed by not finding me fitting into what they saw. So they would question me with a certain tone, and until I would tell them that I have a PhD from LSE, they wouldn’t stop. Everyone in the park didn’t deserve condescending. They didn’t tell something from book. We started talking to people that the stories being written (about us) were wrong.

AG: The point is not just about being inexperienced but added to the form it takes, do you see any correlation there?

EW: No, the vast majority who engaged in the civil rights movement in anger about this country were also kids who came with a different form. I don’t know what form is created by lack of sophistication. I would find that annoying.

AG: That’s the sense we get from literature, that this movement wouldn’t make an impact. We have works by Badiou and others who said that it’s just a party happening outside. It’s not going to be resulting in some shift or anything like that.

EW: I think this conclusion is wrong. I could go to ten people and ask them do you know that you are part of “99 percent”. My guess would be nine out of ten wouldn’t ask me what is 99 percent. That has a meaning that didn’t have it before.

AG: I don’t know anyone who haven’t heard of Occupy. That’s a huge thing. The people whether South Asians, migrants or middle class corporates whom I met told me that it was the first time they got a sense of politicization in terms through Occupy. There is something wrong with corporatization, working for sixteen odd hours a day and things like that. They are able to link those fragments, in that sense there is no doubt that Occupy had an unprecedented impact.

EW: I think of occupation as a tactic. I was thinking about it and had concerns over the way occupation became a gentrified term. To occupy was not seen as such a bad thing – unlike the Palestine issue. There was a group who thought it is a good thing. I don’t come to the conclusion that Occupy failed in some ways – as the critics had it –; and that the movement became overly fixated on a particular space and so much energy was put into thinking how we regain control of that geographic space, etc. I do not agree with that. We miss the strategic moment of Occupy; it is no longer “long live occupy” everywhere. I would not say, “we didn’t succeed”, I would say, “I didn’t succeed in finding any place that could flourish”. But that did happen to some people. So some people do continue in some responsible way. I did feel I didn’t find any other

place to freely engage with the same way. Probably I didn't take appropriate efforts. But I disagree with the conclusion that Occupy didn't make any impact or didn't make any difference, or that it was just a party that happened. I do not think that way; rather I think that it paved the way for Bernie Sanders campaign. I think Occupy mobilized 10,000 people to help out affected communities. It motivated people to engage in movements like Black Lives Matter. We saw similar faces. It created networks of people that still exist, and have moved onto other activities. For many of us it was also educational. It had a form which was pedagogic so to speak. I learnt a lot of things from Occupy – about political organization, and about street protests – I learnt all this because I joined it. There has been a lot of thinking about facts of Occupy and not just of success. That way is a lot less mechanistic. What I think some people wanted from Occupy was a straightforward narrative: “here are our demands whether they were met or failed”. Whether or not life is different now because of these, I learnt from Occupy the importance of discursive politics.

IV

Is Cross-Class Alliance Class Politics?

AG: What about that part of argument that Occupy was symbolic of a cross-class alliance that happened? Could we say that it foregrounded the class issue?

EW: I think that, for me, I was never more aware of class, particularly here in the US. When I was in Occupy either in the park or participating in demonstrations it was very much foregrounded; I think on the one hand it was about inclusive identity, there were everyone, which is the entirety of 99 percent. But within the people I encountered, there were divisions within this 99 percent as well.

AG: So occupy did both?

EW: Yes. It also did that so there is some crossover narrative about the 99 percent. In the US that might look very different if you analyze it in respect to the whole world. So there were some interesting cross talks, one of my friends coming out of town, was distancing herself from the 99 percent. We told her that we know she is obviously a part of it, but she said “my main frame of analysis is not the US, it's the world”. Living within the world context, you may be creating a danger if you are letting a white US upper middle class tell you that they are part of 99 percent and not 1 percent...

AG: So it actually got complex ideas of capitalism here, it is not a monolithic structure out there. But we have this tension when we are part of it, our existential realities are linked to capital yet you are opposed to it. First time when I was reading Occupy literature I felt that it raised complex insights,

otherwise it's just like other general analysis – state is a monolith, capital is a monolith, we are outside of this. But I think Occupy brought to the fore this idea that all of us are linked to capitalism. We are all linked through capitalism, the whole of Wall Street is linked to the rest of the globe. Another world which is different from capitalism has to negotiate with this world. Similarly with state as security and everyday reality, we have to think of other forms of political control rather than the meta-state. Occupy felt they had the courage to bring to the fore the idea that there are tensions with capitalism. They articulated the fact that because of capitalism so many people were excluded from various fruits (FACETS) of life. I think Occupy seems to have had that complex narrative, what analysis brought to it is the organic link that it generated. For the first time I felt that this movement did it, and rather than creating moral high ground and standing outside, it actualized it. You were a part of it, you were with the core, there were others who were well off. So all these dimensions are there, do you think that it made a big difference and long-term impact throughout on this idea that capitalism is something that we have to move beyond?

EW: I think so. Whenever I tell this to my students, I have this in mind to answer that question. I think that Occupy made me think in terms of capitalism and not just in terms of my relationship to my financial resources or lack of it, it made me think a lot of my own experiences, working labour and time. And my own idea of vocation, my job and how I spend my time. How would it mean to be compensated in different ways, how do you spend the time that becomes the heart of the analysis of capitalism? Occupy has changed the ways of thinking in my student group this semester. Students are beginning to analyze how they spend their time, how they make sense of their relationship to university as another site of capital. And that analysis is happening more in the classroom. And that discursive shift is part of the legacy of Occupy.

AG: So capitalism and class can now be understood through lived forms rather than abstract categories that are difficult to understand, in terms of time, leisure, everyday value, cultural tropes, what capital means in everyday life. I think Occupy seems in both said and unsaid ways, to have made everyday reality understandable. People now know what's the meaning of corporatization, homelessness, deprivation. Do you think it allows us to frame class in a different way?

EW: I think that in my experience of Occupy, what I remember is, there were demonstrations, but there were a lot of conversations too. It was very much like a talkative movement, in which there were a lot of people just sitting in the park and having a conversation about economics, about class, about their experience of work, their experience of debt, of money, and that really was educational for me. There were talks on issues like the role of gift economy, the role of mutual

aid, the way people's everyday life is lived. Using and circulating resources is not always about profit, there are everyday lives and situations in which people give gifts that help each other, tiny ways that offer help. Occupy was also seen as a gift giving exercise. We see in it the seeds of the potential of a different world.

V

Trump after Occupy Wall Street

ASP: You have already said that you do not believe, as many do, that Occupy is a failure and you also argued that it had its impact on subsequent mobilizations such as the Black Lives Movement. I think I would agree with you here. But Ajay has already asked you about how to reconcile the high spirit of Occupy and the victory of Trump, and my question is a related one. You said that during the gatherings, participants used to talk a lot, and there would be conversations all along on various issues. Now my question is did you have discussions about race, about the colour line? Or was it exclusively on economy and imperial militarism that dominated the conversation? In other words, to narrow it down further, could the solidarity of 99 percent break down the colour divide or could you still see traces of that division existing among the participants? I am asking this because Charlottesville is also Post-Occupy.

EW: I'm slightly confused by this question. Certainly I don't believe that everything was changed by Occupy or that any socio-political phenomenon that happened since then was determined by OWS. So yes, the Trump election happened after as did the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville and those two things are clearly related but to relate them both to Occupy seems a step too far. Yes, there were conversations about race at Occupy at least in NYC and I would suspect elsewhere though NYC was the site for my fieldwork. The people who gathered in the part were a multiracial, multiethnic group and aware of the way that race was intersectionally related to class (and gender and so many other issues). I would advise you to reach out to the former coordinators of the working group on race for more information on this. There were also several articles written about this – so I would look at the OWS archives as well as general news. See this article for example: <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-people-color-occupy-wall-street/>

ASP: Going to Atlanta recently, I could see a different America, the American South seems to continue to remain in that shadow of poverty. I might be wrong in this observation, but I am keen to know if there were regional differences in Occupy mobilizations and in their demands or whether the NYC gatherings raised the issue of such regional differences in terms of economy and other

material development. Lastly, did the Occupy address issues of religious fanaticism, immigrant rights or xenophobia in any of its demand?

EW: Different Occupy movements had different priorities so it might be more useful to contact an organizer from a different Occupy group to understand how regional differences affected different demands. I don't remember anyone talking about religious fanaticism at Occupy NYC or xenophobia per se. Immigrant rights had a strong intersection with economic justice so there was more talk about this, usually framed within conversations about a living wage. I remember that there was a partnership or at least a conversation with the Urban Justice Center at one point. It seems like this had to do with supporting local food trucks that were also supplying food for Occupiers in Zucotti but I don't remember the details. I hope this helps.

AG & ASP: Thank you so much Emily for speaking to us!