

[recent posts](#) [log in](#) [register](#)[libcom.org](#) [blog](#) [news](#) [library](#) [history](#) [gallery](#) [organise](#) [forums](#)[Home](#)

Marginality and Universality: The Indigenous Working Group and the 17th General Assembly of Occupy Melbourne

A critique written in the days following the 17th General Assembly. I apologise for the poor formatting, but I've been working on this all week and am thoroughly sick of it. I welcome your comments here or on [my blog](#).

The 17th General Assembly of Occupy Melbourne occurred in Treasury Gardens on the 12th November, 2011. Treasury Gardens is the current site of the second occupation of the movement, one marked by a great sense of malaise after the eviction of the first occupation, which was the site of such bold experimentation, at City Square. The 17th Assembly revealed how the Occupation conceives of itself as a cohesive movement, and some of the limitations to this conception. In this article, I use the case of the Indigenous embassy, erected and defended at the 17th Assembly, to illustrate some of the problems in the concept of political unity and the democratic processes intended to express it. At the same time, a review of these events should point a way forward from the political deadlock developing within the movement, which manifests as an inability to imagine strategies beyond the single camp, with a single strategy, presenting a single target for state attacks.

The position of the Indigenous working group within Occupy Melbourne is roughly analogous to the position of Indigenous people within Australian society as a whole. In both cases, we encounter a "totality," a sign which organises a real diversity into an idealised unity. In one case we encounter "Australia," in the other "Occupy Melbourne," totalities which, even when "diversity" is admitted as one of their qualities, possess a slightly homogenising, flattening quality. In both cases, "Indigenous" appears as an intrusive, excessive element, disturbing this homogeneity. In terms of Australia, our imaginary construction of a white, anglophone nation-state is disrupted and embarrassed by the inclusion of this exception. The same goes for many depictions of our movement (mostly young, white, university-educated, etc). Obviously, these static and homogenous images are not the reality, either of Australia or Occupy Melbourne, but we must recognise the real power that these images have to structure reality. In the case of Australia, policy is always (supposedly) geared first and foremost to the needs of the "typical" Australian, and "marginal" interests can only be considered when these first interests are satisfied. This means that Indigenous claims for social goods must compete with a multitude of other marginalised interests: women, migrants, the disabled, and so forth, not to mention the competition internal to the Indigenous community between different social projects and programs. Within Occupy Melbourne, the marginal interest of a working group is always secondary to the assumed consensus.

Before going further, it is worth identifying various strategies which have historically been used to overcome this contradiction between the marginal/particular and the general/universal:

1. Suppression of the margin. This strategy actually has two levels: when possible, the existence of the margin is denied ("Yes, it's sad that there aren't any Aborigines left"); when it's not possible to simply ignore the margin, usually because some marginal people have organised collective power and a collective voice, this strategy turns simply genocidal.
2. Inclusion-as-exception. This is what we have outlined above; it mostly appears as political correctness, or so-called identity politics.
3. Exile. In Indigenous affairs, this is often the strategy of Black Nationalists who start to question whether it's even worthwhile for "Indigenous" to include itself within "Australia." But the refusal of the media to recognise "refugee" as "Australian" shows that this status can be imposed, as well as chosen. In Occupy Melbourne, there exists a consensus damning the first strategy. The third seems theoretically possible, were the Indigenous working group (or some fraction thereof) to finally grow fed up with the latent and actual racism within the movement and walk out. Ultimately, however, one suspects this would be an expression of political impotence (and we should remember, to this effect, that even Malcolm X began to renounce separatism towards the end of his life). The predominant strategy, then, has been the inclusion-as-exception of Indigenous people: their working group brings their voice as one of several special interests within the mosaic that is Occupy Melbourne, subordinate to the group's consensus, as are we all. But is this the absolute limit of political possibility?

Posted By

usevalue

Nov 18 2011 13:44

Tags[Australia,James](#)[Pollard,Occupy Wall](#)[Street](#)**Share**[Tweet](#) 3[Like](#) 1[G+1](#) 0[reddit this!](#)**Related**

[For Democracy and Discipline: A Plea to Occupy Melbourne Aims, principles and statutes- Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation 2. The Unions Fight Back](#)
[The Australian maritime strike, 1878-1879](#)
[ASI Report to IWA Congress 2009 on the Belgrade 6](#)

Attached files

Featured



Gender War & Social Stability in Xi's China: Interview with a Friend of the Women's Day Five (1st half)

Many friends and associates of the five feminists detained on March 7 are still in hiding, but one was willing to meet for an interview on March 16. The fact of their detainment has been widely...
[Comments \(1\)](#)



Notes on Oakland 2011

A first-hand account and reflection on the events of November 2, where there was an attempted wildcat general strike.



The 1935 Strutwear strike: 'The stories of the workers are different' - Elizabeth Faue

An article by Elizabeth Faue about the 1935 Strutwear strike in Minneapolis.

**libcom.org**

Like 27,917

[Follow @libcomorg](#)

14.4K followers

Log in for more features

Click [here](#) to register now. Logged in users:

- Can comment on articles and discussions
- Get 'recent posts' refreshed more regularly
- Bookmark articles to your own reading list
- Use the site private messaging system
- Start forum discussions, submit articles, and more...

The 17th General Assembly began in the standard way, with the reports of working groups. The delegate of the Indigenous working group came forth and announced that the erection of a tent embassy had been achieved. He requested (informally, it would later be said) the solidarity of the assembly, and was assured of it by a wave of raising arms and voices. The meeting continued. The logistics working group, during its report, pointed out that all existing structures (including the embassy, but also some set up by other political groups) lacked the mandate of the general assembly. It was during this report that several police moved on the embassy in an effort to remove it. Most of the Assembly responded immediately: the embassy was defended by a crowd, the police were surrounded, and to clapping and the cry of "Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land" they were forced back.[1] When the crisis passed, and as the Assembly began to reconvene, there were heated arguments over whether the words of the logistics working group, or the failure of the facilitators to "officially" adjourn the Assembly, constituted a (possibly racist) attack on the legitimacy of the embassy. Others put forward a more nuanced perspective, that the process itself was at fault, and suggested it be altered. I will return to these political dilemmas, but what is important to note is that as soon as the arguments were past the General Assembly entertained a motion for the defense of the embassy. This decision, which was basically to do "officially" in the future what we had all just done in actuality, took several confused minutes to debate and pass, largely, it seemed, due to sectarian tensions. When it finally passed, the meeting then spent the remainder of its duration discussing and approving the form of a new, more established, camp in Treasury Gardens.

I think it is incorrect to ascribe the reluctance of some to endorse the embassy, or its defense, to racism or malicious intent. Rather, it resulted from the same fetishism of democratic process and consensus which causes many to endorse "individual" structures, while at the same time agonising over what an "Occupy Melbourne" structure is. In this respect, those who went on to fight for motions to retroactively validate the defense were equally guilty. Both factions attempted to relegate the actions of the Indigenous working group to an included exception, an element at the margin of our unity which must be subordinated to the will of the whole. Of course, the divide was ostensibly between strategic conservatism and principled militancy. But the fact that we spent so much time debating whether we would collectively endorse the actions that we had already taken so decisively indicates to me how superficial the difference between those positions actually was.

What the events of the day showed is that their is in fact a fourth way of resolving the particular/universal contradiction. Whatever their merits or detriments, all of the previously named solutions have in common the preservation of the marginal as marginal, as a contained excess. What occurred on Saturday was something entirely different: the marginal element directly became the universal. Through their actions, the Indigenous working group implicitly posed several demands:

1. Treasury Gardens should have structures, both in order to defy the council and to increase the effectiveness of the occupation.
2. Those who are fighting systemic injustice need wait on no authority to legitimise their efforts to fight.
3. Solidarity is not the outcome of mediating procedure, but of direct bonds of political love between singularities.

These proposals gained the effective consensus (of bodies, minds, and voices raised in indignation) because they were not limited to the circumstances of the Indigenous working group. The marginal status of Indigenous people (even within an "inclusive" movement) and the working group's frustration with the strategic timidity of the movement forced them to create these demands. This outburst revealed a subterranean politics which had been hidden beneath the supposed consensus of the group. Subsequently, the assembly attempted to corral that instinctive, "spontaneous" outburst of collective refusal back into the space of procedural consensus, the only space which so far enjoys recognised legitimacy within the movement. While the General Assembly is certainly a more democratic space than the shambling, zombified parliaments of the world's governments, we still see here a failure of its political imagination.

Normally, I hate the verbal rituals of solidarity that the Australian left expresses with Indigenous people. How radical can the acknowledgement of country really be if Julia Gillard can utter its words without bursting into flame? And what is the real impact of these words when the actions they ought to imply are always deferred to another day, another place? But when we surrounded the Indigenous embassy, the chant which had always seemed like ritualistic politeness to me in the past exploded from my lips: I felt my solidarity with the dispossessed throughout my mind and in my body, a unity called "praxis" in Marxist jargon. It seemed that we were living a politics that had reached back in time from some revolutionary future, and which pulled us inexorably forward. For a moment, the ontological order of the movement was completely inverted. Instead of the Indigenous working group trying to accommodate itself within the alienating consensus of the General Assembly (alienating and alienated to us all), the movement was suddenly subsumed within the marginal position of the Indigenous working group. That position was our strength and our righteous anger. And in that moment, it ceased to be the position of the Indigenous

working group at all: it became the universal truth of our movement, the embodiment of our collective desire to be free. The political effect of this event was obvious over the next few days. It is doubtful whether the Assembly would have even dared to call for structures without the event; it seems more likely that a collapse back into impotent legalism would have occurred. And while we failed to really generalise the demands of the event, continuing to remove structures when the council issued their notices to comply, the refusal to negotiate over the presence of the Indigenous embassy demonstrates a fidelity to the event, an internalisation of truth that it took one hundred of the police on the following Wednesday morning to erase.

Comments

The purpose of this article is not to claim that Indigenous politics are now universal politics, or that the Indigenous working group should now claim leadership of the movement (I think they're smart enough not to want it anyway). Nor are Indigenous politics always the most radical politics: there are Indigenous politicians and business owners, and Indigenous voices which encourage accommodation with the present order. Rather, I argue that in a given social-historical situation it is possible for a marginal position, due to its very desperate need, to give rise to a demand that suddenly reveals the universal truth of the entire situation. This was precisely Marx's point on the proletariat: if the proletariat could really express its desires for a project of liberation from its repressed and excluded position, that project would in fact be one of universal liberation. If one accepts a Marxist methodology (while setting aside a 19th century sociology), then it should come as no surprise that Indigenous political action should be capable of revealing the universal will of Occupy Melbourne. It is vital that the movement learn this lesson well: Occupy Melbourne is not some tool which the 99% must wield in order to restore its well-deserved democratic representation. The 99% is a demographic phantasm in which every human voice is drowned out. Rather, Occupy Melbourne must be the process by those who are politically, economically, and legally 0% can suddenly become 100%. This revolutionary inversion happens in a moment, but if one recognises the moment one can act in fidelity with it, generalise its meaning, and exploit its potential to the full.

Notes

[1] I would like to point out that the tactic here was one which I choose to call anti-violence. The police were forced back not because we were threatening violence; only the state has used or threatened violence in this campaign. Rather, the police fell back when they realised our physical presence robbed them of the option of inciting violence. I conceive of anti-violence of this sort of being a proactive, aggressive strategic orientation: like nonviolence it refuses to use violent means; but unlike nonviolence it actively seeks to deny such means to the enemy as well. I intend to develop a theory of this strategy in a future article.

[login](#) or [register](#) to post comments

Nov 20 2011 01:13

[login](#) or [register](#) to post comments

Nov 20 2011 00:39

[login](#) or [register](#) to post comments

[login](#) or [register](#) to post comments

Nov 20 2011 01:18

[login](#) or [register](#) to post comments