



Patrimonio Designs.  
*Worker Hammer Protester Protest*  
*Occupy Wall Street, 2011.*

# Theses on the New *Öffentlichkeit*

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Thailand, the Philippines, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, the United States, Mexico, France, England, Italy, Greece. From around the world rises the repeated specter of a crowd that calls for change. This crowd erupts in public, seemingly spontaneously, but also as the apparently inevitable manifestation of an incipience that had been repressed only temporarily by the state. The crowd calls in the name of a public that it appears to incarnate but that exceeds it both temporally and spatially. The crowd appropriates a material place of definitive parameters, while circuiting its discourse through the dematerializing space of the global media. And the crowd speaks in a voice that resounds in the apparently transparent idiom of a transnational language of democracy, a voice that is said to have been waiting for the occasion of its sounding forth: the people's voice. And yet, this appearance of a speaking is no longer to be understood in the terms of communicative action, because it has entered into a specular arena in a manner that severs that which can be seen from that which can be heard. In the process, the possibilities for representational politics have been refigured. How can we understand this metamorphosis in the long history of a relation between media and politics?

1.

"We are the 99 percent," assert the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protestors—wherever they may be located: New York, Oakland, Seattle, Chicago, Washington, DC, and many other places besides. The movement moves, arises in one location, until it must migrate elsewhere, dissolving and reforming in advance of or in response to the interventions of city officials and police while mutating daily in response to the particular organizations and individuals who accrete on its periphery or drop from its metamorphosing body. What all of these manifestation share, however, is the site of their appearance; namely, the street. Though it has been a medium of state power in every imperial moment, the street (not merely the road or the pathway) is a sign of modernity, whose social form is connectivity and whose orchestrating ideological value is mobility.<sup>1</sup> In many places, the street is the last public space in a territory now conceived as mere (private) real estate. That the indeterminate crowd should have as its place of mobile assembly, not the arena or the agora but this

asphalt “in-between” thus makes sense.

The protestors use a rhetoric of near totality, the “99 percent,” whose simultaneous proximity and distance from absolute consensus must be remarked. On the one hand, this statistical figure of wealth distribution forms the basis for a claim to representativeness and legitimacy; it refers to the already existent. On the other hand, it grounds a demand for the representation of interests that are specifically different from those of the governing minority. These demands range from greater taxation of the 1 percent to a complete structural transformation of the economy. But in either case, the demand refers to that which is not yet existent. So the rhetoric contains a split, by which the inexistent grounds itself in the existent on the basis of an ideal isomorphism between the material interests of a majority—which is nonetheless abstracted in statistical form—and their representational force in the political sphere. In this context, it matters not that polls show that the OWS movement, like the conservative Tea Party movement that is its parallel as much as its antithesis, is supported by only about one third of the U.S. population.<sup>2</sup> The rhetoric of the 99 percent is not a representation of ideological commitment but an announcement of actual inequity. Only on this basis, and the perception of a gap in the place of an ideal isomorphism, does it constitute the ethicopolitical ground for the OWS movement’s acts on behalf of a larger constituency, whose interests it claims to grasp, to serve, and to symbolically incarnate.

Proportionality is an intrinsic principle in the conception of justice that animates the OWS movement. The incontrovertible extremity of the imbalance between the few and the many constitutes the animating force of the protest movement. In the United States, the top 1 percent have a larger share of national wealth than at any time since 1928.<sup>3</sup> But the delineation of the opposition between the 1 percent and the 99 percent rests on the effacement of enormous socioeconomic differences interior to the category of the 99 percent, which covers everything from the most destitute members of the chronically unemployed to the well-off members of the managerial professions. In truth, the discourse of the 99 percent is not a class discourse but its opposite, indeed its antithesis; it is a discourse and a moral iconology of justice as proportionality. This is why the OWS movement can accommodate such a broad array of practico-strategic positions, including those advocating structural transformation and those seeking the mere rearrangement of elements within the existing structure. The demand for the latter is as common as is that for the former in OWS protests, and one not uncommonly hears critiques of the current situation that take the form of nostalgic defenses of (Adam) Smithian analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Proportionality is inseparable from majoritarianism, which

reaches its limit and gathers its authority at the point where the approach to totality can be made to underwrite a critique—which may or may not address capital’s misrepresentation of its interests as those of the common.<sup>5</sup> The problem of representation is displaced by this sublimity, where the nearly magical conjoining of “we” and “99 percent” seems to bypass the question, “who speaks?” and “for whom?” I use the term *sublimity* in its strict sense, to describe an approach to the abyssal disappearance of the rational, self-accounting subject in the face of an enormity beyond calculation. This is the irony of the OWS movement: It depends on calculative reason in order to produce the authority that comes with proportionality in a representational system of what Jacques Rancière calls the count.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, that proportionality is based in an effacement of difference, and this is accomplished through an affectively potent sense of participation in the totality and, moreover, in the possible self-presence of that totality. Here the tactics of direct action acquire their force. Their allure is that of presence. They hold out the promise of a totality that would need no representation. The phantasmatic conjuring of direct-action protests is haunted by their resemblance to the earliest political rallies in anticolonial struggles and their production of a new kind of collective political subject; namely, “the people.”

## 2.

Neither majoritarianism nor direct action can ever answer the question “Who is ‘the people’?” because “the people” is never that which can be present. “The people” extends in time and place, encompasses those who have vanished, those who have yet to come—as well as those who, quite simply, stayed home. But this excess is not limited to those national-political formations that organize themselves under the rubric of “the people.” The social is always larger than what can ever be present. This excess is not merely to be measured in quantitative terms, however; it is also a function of the communicative dimension itself.

In his efforts to conceive of the bourgeois public sphere, Jürgen Habermas acknowledges a certain excess in the communicative practice that constitutes it and concedes that such practice is not reducible to the mere repetition of norms and conventions (à la John Searle), despite its dependence on shared rules of meaning-making. Rather, the bourgeois public sphere is, before all else, to be grasped as a function of the activities of speakers who negotiate the situational terms in which their claims can be validated—such that, for example, statements will be understood as truth claims, metaphors, invocations, threats, and so forth. As Seyla Benhabib observes, this metapragmatic paradigm rests on an intentionalist theory of language and understands communication

as the drive to ensure transparency between intention and outcome.<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida's critique of this approach consists in an attribution of that excess to language itself—rather than to a gap between intention and realization. For Derrida, signification is endlessly unfurling in time so long as a reader is reading. Signification is determined not through reference to an originary intention but by the complex and differential relations between all signifying elements within the field of reading and by the inevitability of an erasure that is internal to signification itself.<sup>8</sup>

This is a necessary corrective, but if we are to understand the OWS movement as an instance of more general transformations in the public sphere and the practice of politics today—as we should—simply to reiterate an argument about the excess of language is not enough. Rather, we need to understand the nature and force of the linkage (or delinking) between proportionalism and representationalism, on the one hand, and the aspiration to immediacy, on the other. To this end, we may usefully revisit those theories of language that understand communicative practice neither exclusively in terms of the message function nor vis-à-vis the sociality function (the overcoming of corporeal individuation) but in terms of linguistic doubleness. My thesis is that our contemporaneity is defined by the rupturing of the relations between these double aspects of language and that the result of that rupturing is a displacement of the political value of “having a voice” by that of “being seen to speak.” This rupturing is inseparable from the particular nature of the technomediatic environment in which populism currently takes shape.

In Walter Benjamin's analysis, the “language of man” communicates not only its content but the fact and capacity of communication: “this capacity for communication is language itself. Or: the language of a mental entity is directly that which is communicable in it.”<sup>9</sup> Benjamin's messianic if materialist philosophic anthropology finds its echo in Claude Lévi-Strauss's analogizing of language and exchange, on which basis he asserts that all human relation is enabled by a reciprocity that consists in a double disequilibrium: “the individual always receives more than he gives, and gives more than he receives.”<sup>10</sup> This excess emerges from the fact that the gift is not merely the given thing nor even the concept of giving. The gift is both *signifiant* (the signifying) and *signifié* (the signified), and as such it communicates the possibility of reciprocity—hence, of contract, of debt and duty.<sup>11</sup>

Insofar as communication is an inherently doubled process, any model of the public sphere that construes it as the space of a mere sending and receiving of messages, or the production of a shared horizon of intelligibility, must be rethought or at least supplemented. The demand for such a rethinking is intensified by recent developments in the mode of communicative practice that

characterizes social movements in the era of digital broadcast and social media. Protest movements today function in the public sphere without the assumption that consensus is a goal, and they do so in ways that specularize the capacity for communication while severing it from any structure of reciprocity, however deferred. In so doing, these movements mark the transformation of *Öffentlichkeit* and perhaps the concept of the political itself.

### 3.

Since Immanuel Kant linked the critique of pure reason to the freedom to “exhibit the thoughts and doubts which one cannot resolve oneself for public judgment without thereupon being decried as a malcontent and a dangerous citizen,” debate about what, in English, we term “the public sphere,” has been vexed by Kant’s further insistence and normative claim that “human reason . . . recognizes no other judge than universal human reason itself, in which everyone has a voice.”<sup>12</sup> The criticism of Kant’s critique has largely been oriented by either the demand to historicize, relativize, and problematize the notion of reason’s universality or the effort to displace the teleological presumption that reasoned debate seeks agreement with an analysis that privileges the activity of debating and agonistic exchange.

Habermas’s account of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere as the institutionalizing space in which rational-critical discourse was sustained by the free exchange of ideas is too well-known but also too complex to recount in any detail here. What is important for our purposes is his claim that it was the force of the mass media and its relationship to capital that undermined the achievements of that briefly lived experiment.

Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere, in its ideal form, could include all members of the propertied and literate classes but was never identical to the social totality of the public in any given moment. Nonetheless, the exclusions that subtended the supposed inclusiveness of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere have been the focus of much skeptical analysis. These exclusions fall into two main categories: those that determine what issues and interests can rise to the level of “common concern” and those that mitigate the capacity of any particular speaker to appear capable of signifying the universal and thus making generalizable claims.<sup>13</sup> Gayatri Spivak has resignified the term *subaltern* to describe the position of the one who is structurally foreclosed from the public sphere and whose voice therefore remains unintelligible even in the moment of its sounding forth.<sup>14</sup> If, typically, such exclusion has been overdetermined by historically specific social norms (of sexual difference, gender, race, and class, national identity, religious affiliation, or ethnicity) and if it has been effecuated by the state and capital now triangulated by the mass media,

those who are in a position of structural blockage are nonetheless sometimes heard. Often, they enter into audibility not through rational debate but through gestures whose signifying potential gathers its force precisely from the labors of repression exerted by the state, always a repressive apparatus even when it is also a productive machine.

#### 4.

Let us think here of a man immolating himself. In another moment, the Vietnamese monk Thích Quảng Đức might have come to mind, though his arrival would have been preceded by a slower journey.<sup>15</sup> In our moment, Mohamed Bouazizi's horrifying gesture reaches our eyes—though not necessarily our ears—through a heavily capitalized global network that is the precondition of state control as well as insurgent social movements. Bouazizi's incendiary act of self-destructive outrage sparked a movement whose proliferation across Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria, among other places, has come to be known as the Arab Spring. Against all odds, speaking from beneath and beyond the space of power, his gesture signified—not because it conformed to the protocols of rational or even agonistic debate, but because the violence of an authoritarian state sustained by global capital created the conditions for a certain receptivity to this signifying—even when it was dislocated from any possible ambition on the “speaker's” part to control his significations. This is what self-immolation does. It is a sending of a message that exceeds every effort to determine the path of its signifying and that communicates the limit rather than the possibility of communication. As sacrifice, it annihilates the medium of any future (reciprocal) relation, and, whether out of despair, rage, frustration, vindictiveness, grief, or something else, it mocks the ideal of a speech community grounded in intersubjective recognition.

Throwing themselves toward the public in acts of violent self-presencing, public suicides simultaneously appear and withdraw without at the same time negating the future reading of these gestures. This is crucial. What the public suicide condenses in itself by virtue of its publicness (*Öffentlichkeit*) is a form of intended signification dislocated from any future communicative relation. How can we account for the proliferation of such gestures—which nonetheless retain their status as exception—and their accumulating force in our moment? An adequate theory of *Öffentlichkeit* today must go beyond the question of resistant agencies (Benhabib), the multiplication of spheres, and the emergence of counterpublics (Fraser, Hauser, and Warner). Such a theory must be able to think publicness beyond the public sphere, in the nonspaces of a networked world.

## 5.

In English, concepts of alternative or resistant public spheres and counterpublics work mainly by remarking the limits that constitute a given space of discourse, whether conceived in material or social terms. Accordingly, they focus on the conditions of possibility for debate within restricted or particularized communities (where the claim to universality has been surrendered). These entail a minimal set of ontological and normative principles shared by all participants in the rhetorical arena (to use Hauser's idiom).<sup>16</sup> Radical cultural difference (often a shorthand for so-called religious difference, including the difference that refuses to grant it the status of "religion") is often adduced here as a kind of outside limit to the universalizability of any public.<sup>17</sup> But even without postulating such difference, the degree to which any public sphere can accommodate dissensus is widely contested. In the end, the notion of *Öffentlichkeit* remains indissolubly bound to the question of shared meanings, that old anthropological question made so elegant by Clifford Geertz.<sup>18</sup> But gestures like that of Bouazizi's seem to require something else. They do not participate in the political "through the medium of talk," as Fraser says. Rather, they seem to express frustration about an incapacity to make words do the work of communication. Here, communication would mean the production of a situation in which the reality of a person's claims is agreed to (granted intelligibility) in a manner that generates a consequential response. But much of what occurs in public takes the shape of vectoral expression and articulates precisely this skepticism about language's communicative capacities. Not only does the political suicide mark the frustrated withdrawal from a possible future reciprocity, but, increasingly, social movements partake of the vectoral practices that McKenzie Wark described nearly two decades ago.<sup>19</sup>

In this context, *Öffentlichkeit* cannot be understood through reference to a drive to consensus. Nor can it be grasped by substituting agonistic exchange for the orientation to agreement, as emphasized in Patchen Markell's analysis.<sup>20</sup> A better approach would be to relinquish the spatial rhetoric of the English "sphere" and restore the qualitative orientation of the German term so that *Öffentlichkeit* can be thought as a form of address rather than an intention toward agreement. At the same time, however, this address has acquired a new dimension in which "being seen to speak" competes with "being heard." In the present conjuncture, visibility threatens to displace and not merely supplement audibility and legibility. The spectacular visibility of the Tunisian man's gesture communicates the possibility of communication by the fact of its publicness. One might refer to it as a kind of metasign. But the sign itself has vanished. In this

sense, Bouaziz's gesture partakes of a form of *Öffentlichkeit* born of the splitting of those two dimensions of language described by Benjamin and Lévi-Strauss: on the one hand, that which might be communicated (a signified); on the other hand, the communication of the possibility of communication. That splitting redefines publicness as a form of address in a space where messages may go astray, be misunderstood, overheard, appropriated and misappropriated, comprehended and accepted or disavowed, mimicked or parodied, repeated and transmitted in truncated or exaggerated form, and so forth. The supporting form of this split communication is not the coffee house but the crowd. And its essence is visibility.

We may borrow Jacques Lacan's phrase here: the gesture gives itself to be seen. This giving to be seen is new in a sense, but only insofar as it entails the transformed repetition of an older possibility—specifically, Kant's linkage of *Öffentlichkeit* with the verb *auszustellen* (to exhibit). Kant was the first to link the free exchange of ideas with self-specularization. This specularizing gesture is now significantly transformed by the mass media, which extends the range of visibility almost infinitely while opening up to endless deferral the moment of recognition by the Other. Today, the exhibition of oneself takes place not in relation to those who resemble oneself but in an expanding realm of anonymous receivers whose listening takes the form of overhearing and whose seeing consists in voyeurism. This development may appear to be correlated with new digital technologies, but its origins lie in the generalization of print cultures.

## 6.

Studies of nineteenth-century colonial societies have shown us how the political world changed as a result of the introduction of print media and new forms of reading. Change in these societies was not the result of the rise of the coffee house, in which reasoning people of property debated the meanings of commodities (like books) or attempted to come to agreement on ideas, free of coercion and oversight by either church or state. Rather, the transformation of the forms of reading made possible by the newspaper and literature enabled a new kind of public to emerge—mainly because its members had begun to receive messages differently. These readers heard things that were not directed specifically at them and that were written by authors who could never have anticipated their peculiar reading gazes. Moreover, this practice of reading was redoubled in the political domain, where the new media met the crowd, to produce the form of the rally. There, statements began to be made in public without being addressed to anyone in particular. Like the reader of the newspaper, the passerby of a rally was initially a mere overhearer. In the

early histories of anticolonial foment in Southeast Asia, for example, the rally played a crucial role in enabling a public to cohere and eventually to assume a self-representation as the form of appearance of the people.<sup>21</sup> This was true in many places and remains true today. The rally is a crowd assembled to overhear messages that circulate beyond the dyadic structures of sender and receiver and thus at the limit of any effort to produce a horizon of shared meaning.

The condition of possibility for the crowd's assumption of a political role includes the existence of spaces in which it is able to assemble, spaces where neither property rights nor the state's coercive force prevent assembly (though this does not preclude the state from trying to exercise its power at any given moment). The protest movements of the last several decades have, almost uniformly, incarnated themselves in the street or in public parks. This was as true in Thailand in 1991, when the cell-phone-toting, middle-class opponents of the military coup gathered in Sanam Luang (a major park in central Bangkok) and marched down Rajadamnoen Street, as it was in 2010, when largely disenfranchised migrant laborers and members of the rural poor from the northeastern periphery (Isaan) gathered on Silom Road, a financial artery and retail center, to oppose the bourgeois-backed coup that had followed the deposition of media-mogul-turned-prime-minister Thaksin Shinawatra. It was as true in Tahrir Square in Egypt, when Cairenese citizens summoned one another using Facebook and other social media to call for the displacement of Mubarak's long-lived authoritarian regime and the institution of democratic reforms, as it was in Zuccotti Park in New York City, where the OWS movement encamped to demonstrate its opposition to the inequitable distribution of wealth in the United States and beyond.

The difference between these assemblies and, say, the mobs that form in the aftermath of soccer matches or hockey games is that they assemble in relation to a speaking, which they stage and which their members attend, that is intended to be heard but is nonetheless not directed at anyone in particular. That is, this form of the crowd is one oriented toward overhearing. And, in contrast to that discharging crowd described by Elias Canetti that evaporates in negativity or erupts in violence, these protesting assemblies also seek to preserve themselves through ad hoc archives.<sup>22</sup> Signs and placards are the crowd's signal media because they have neither an obvious subject nor an identifiable object. "We are the 99 percent" is spoken by any number of substitutable and indeterminate speakers, any of whom can inhabit the position of the "we."

This politicized crowd and its form of discourse arise in public—they are forms of appearance of *Öffentlichkeit*—but they are also

conditioned by the absence of a conventional (Hegelian) dialectic of intersubjective identity formation. This does not mean that the new crowd does not seek recognition. However, recognition in this context is solicited not to consolidate any sense of identity but to confirm the status of speakers as ones who can be seen to speak. Recognition grants them objectivity without producing intersubjectivity. What is exhibited by the rallying crowd is less a capacity to speak or even to be heard than a capacity to be seen to speak.

This capacity to be seen to speak includes the capacity to not speak. The politics of silence, of theatricalized muting, derives its force here. We know how powerful the theatricalizing of silence can be for the accusation of censorship. Consider, for example, that in Thailand, in 1991, when the military junta led by Suchinda Kraprayoon instituted a requirement for all news media to submit their stories for approval prior to publication, the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* ran pages that were inked out or blank, attesting thereby to the occlusions that were being performed by the junta. In Argentina, as elsewhere, the appearance in the street of protestors whose mouths were taped shut made clear that people were not free to speak, though they were, to a degree, able to show that they were not free to speak.

The performance of muting is not the same as the refusal of language. And something quite different has occurred when, for example, protestors enter the arena of public discourse, such as a university lecture hall, and, rather than entering into debate, calling out disagreements, or heckling speakers, they orchestrate coughing and sneezing to make visible their absolute refusal of a linguistic exchange, asserting that the conditions for entering debate have already been unjustly overdetermined and overdetermined as unjust.

This tactic theatricalizes a subversion of language as an object of interpretation.<sup>23</sup> Reduced to the purely corporeal, to the medium of language rather than its signifying function, the coughing can announce only the refusal of communicative relation in Habermas's terms. And it does so self-consciously, within a (generally implicit) critique of the metapragmatics in which Habermas's argument unfolds. As a sign of the demise of the paradigm of the public sphere elaborated within bourgeois rationality, it should not be underestimated. Nonetheless, the coughing is not not a communicative act; it simply rests on the radical severing of those two dimensions of communication described by Benjamin and Levi-Strauss. Coughing communicates the possibility of a relation born of communication, and, at least metaphorically, refuses that relation by withholding that which would be amenable to interpretive labor. We might say that coughing is the medium without message, including the message of a possible mediation.

## 7.

Though an irreducible chasm separates the gestures of the self-immolating man (whether in Tunisia or Vietnam so many years ago or in Tibet today) and the self-consciously coughing protestor, both gestures function in the visual register as forms of publicness to assert the presence of the one gesturing without soliciting a reciprocating gesture. If such gestures are intended (and we can never be sure) to generate a response, in the form of political transformation or economic redress, for example, the one making them annihilates his or her own capacity to attend such a response in the future. Accordingly, if a dialectic is in play, it is not one of intersubjectivity. The address is public in general and overheard by anyone.

I am aware of the risks of comparing the extremity of the desperation felt by Bouazizi (and the fatal risking of death that he enacted) with the sometimes petulant-seeming antics of students in New York City, where coughing risks nothing. But in making the comparison, I do not propose an equation of their moral and/or political worth. Nor do I wish to draw a line connecting the economic circumstances that overdetermined Bouazizi's act and the OWS protest movement's emergence—though reading these phenomena vis-à-vis recent developments in the organization of global capital is both possible and necessary. My point here is that the publicness symptomized in these gestures is a form of “exhibiting” or giving to be seen that nonetheless rests not on representational speaking but on the presencing of speakers in public (in the street, mainly). That is, such publicness rests on the splitting off of communication from intersubjectivity.

## 8.

We are speaking of a space of address exceeding the dialectic of subject formation and unbound from the presumption that meaning is produced through the negotiation of the speaker's intentions. This is a space of anonymity (which is different from the old bourgeois ideal of a space in which status is disregarded), a space of overhearing more than reciprocal exchange, and a space in which the double dimension of communication is riven, such that the communication of the possibility of communication (even when undertaken in a negative mode) and the object of any communication are held apart.

In any political situation where representation is construed as “having a voice,” inequality takes the form of being seen but not heard. The fetishization of bodies—sexed as female and raced as not-white in the Euro-American world—is a function of this relation. The demand for “increased visibility,” often made in the names of women and people of color is thus born of a profound misunderstanding. Women and black people, for example, are

not invisible. Rather, they are reduced to visibility all the time. If this visibility has as its corollary a certain lack of interest on the part of the one who bears the power of oversight, that is because mere visibility does not connote potential power (of the kind that could grant recognition). So, the servant goes unnoticed in the colonial household. Transgressions that lead the servant to become visible typically fail to enable the acquisition of a voice—if by that we mean the possibility of being heard.

But, today, if the possibility of being heard seems foreclosed, that is because power (personal, corporate, or state) does not seem to need any particular servant (Hegel's bondsman) but can find one anywhere. This possibility is old, but it has been newly intensified by the globalization of capital—and the flexibility attending it—and is itself dependent on electronic media. These media enable communication without relation, or connection without mediation. At this juncture—of a political logic unmoored from recognition, an economy unmoored from territoriality, and a speaking unmoored from relation—new protest movements assume their form: as an inversion within the mediatic system of global capital.

The most notable feature of these movements is their ambition to access the media immediately. They assume force (to influence events) not through a dialectic of recognition but through an anonymous circuiting of their (digital) image through the global media. This circuiting permits the gathering sense of a mass whose enormity is materialized iconically and rendered effective by virtue of its approach to an impossible totality. In the return of its image to itself (in a circle but not a dialectic), the rallying crowd assumes its possible identity as a collective subject. However, that subject does not speak so much as it appears to be speaking. This is the form of “direct action” today, as protestors video themselves and rally organizers put up their flat-screen panels to show the live footage of the massing crowds as they descend on Tahrir Square or Zuccotti Park. In New York City, protestors watched themselves on YouTube in the very space of protest, and media stations in the street gathered, uploaded, edited, and broadcast their own images, competing with the official news media, with its tendency to underestimate the magnitude of these events. But these broadcasts had a second purpose; namely, to solicit possible protestors from an invisible and indefinitely extending realm.

## 9.

Crowdsourcing is a crucial part of politics today, not only in protest movements but in authoritarian regimes where despotic governments wish to produce the image of representativeness. Why must both power and its opponent appear in this form?

Because the ideology of popular legitimacy as a form of proportionality (and not just rational self-legitimation) saturates almost all of the global political landscape—even though, and perhaps because, the question of representation has been deeply threatened with displacement. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge recognized this crisis three decades ago when they wrote about a collective doubt about the bourgeois sphere’s capacity for self-legitimation. In an analysis that shares something with Michel Foucault’s conception of the biopolitical, Negt and Kluge assert that what passes for a public sphere today (in 1972) is a “pseudo-public sphere” that “overlay[s]” the classical bourgeois public sphere with “new production public spheres. . . . Their roots are not public: they work the raw material of everyday life, which, in contrast to the traditional forms of publicity, derive their penetrative force directly from capitalist production.”<sup>24</sup> Negt and Kluge were nonetheless not prepared to abandon the utility of the concept of the public sphere if it could also provide a space for the proletariat to constitute itself as a collectivity:

So long as the contradiction between the growing socialization of human beings and the attenuated forms of their private life persists, the public sphere is simultaneously a genuine articulation of a fundamental social need. It is the only form of expression that links the members of society, who are merely “privately” aggregated via the production process, by combining their unfolded social characteristics with one another. . . . The public sphere possesses use value when social experience organizes itself within it.<sup>25</sup>

But does social experience organize itself within the public sphere if that sphere is constituted via the mass media as a visual assemblage in which anonymous speaking and self-confirmation through self-imaging substitutes for the dialectic of subjectification, granting the crowd the appearance of a collective subject without requiring, as its precondition, the slower education of consciousness and through it, the reorganization of desire? If, in the Philippines, for example, text messages can be said to have brought down President Joseph Estrada (in 2001), that was both because SMS-ing was used to circulate rumors and information, undermining his authority, and because text messages could be used to call forth crowds from the anonymity of a sending strategy that worked something like a pyramid scheme.<sup>26</sup> Passing on messages via SMS-ing ensured that individuals were circulating messages from senders they did not know to receivers they had never met. Such texting, which had been deemed a “mania” in the Philippines as early as 1999, became a significant political technology in Southeast Asia and elsewhere following the millennial turn. Long before American political campaigns formally

embraced it as a strategy in the run-up to Barack Obama's election, youth in Helsinki and Tokyo were already appropriating the medium to organize musical and other events. By 2002 the term *smart mob* had solidified to describe this networked process for generating apparently spontaneous gatherings (within a few years these would be appropriated by advertising companies, especially for telecommunications ads).<sup>27</sup>

I do not mean to imply that protest movements such as OWS or the Arab Spring are a form of smart mob. They are motivated by real critical principles and not merely the satisfaction of a desire cultivated by the culture industry. These demands, if they are made, have force not by virtue of the ways in which ideas are exhibited in public for judgment but because of the apparently immediate presencing of the crowd in public, a crowd whose "massness" must make a claim on its proximity to totality in order to gather force. But this crowd, in order to achieve any objectivity—for the purposes of self-sustenance if not self-reproduction—must have an image of itself as such. The image, then, is the anticipatory origin of that force, as well as its reproduction.

But a crowd does not speak as such, except through representative voices or in that kind of speech that can be spoken by any and all members at a time; namely, in slogans and, sometimes, song.<sup>28</sup> To this extent, the crowd is merely the scene of speaking. Such speaking, the inverse of anonymous listening, can be heard by anyone but attributed to no one in particular. Here, too, the ideal of rational exchange based on the contest over meanings rooted in an intentionalist theory of language runs aground.

## 10.

Today's protest movements refuse to use the forms and practices of the bourgeois public sphere to contest that same bourgeois public sphere. But, not having supplemented the questions of "who speaks and for whom?" with "how do they speak?" they are reduced to a repudiation of language's representational capacities. One symptom of this development is the domination of the blogosphere by the drive to pure expressivity. Here, people "publish" their opinions but not in order to subject them to judgment. The tendency to affective acceleration and incendiary ad hominem rhetoric, which any reader of the opinion pages on newspaper websites can see, is as symptomatic of this development as are the direct-action protests around the world. Everywhere, we see a tendency for critique to take the form of protest, for self-expression to substitute for communicative relation.

In this sense, the discontented (only some of whom can claim to be part of the proletariat) seem to have taken to heart Negt and Kluge's assertion that "If the masses try to fight a ruling class reinforced by the power of the public sphere, their fight is hopeless;

they are always simultaneously fighting against themselves, for it is by them that the public sphere is constituted.”<sup>29</sup> But the open-source model of politics proffered by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, which we see in the SMS-generated rallies in places as far apart as the Philippines, Tunisia, Thailand, Egypt, and New York, are marked by a distinct pattern that, thus far, has failed to provide a radical alternative.<sup>30</sup> They have had the power (in some cases) to displace political regimes but not political structures (the Egyptian claim to revolution was at least temporarily belied by the military’s return to power and its subsequent support of President Morsi’s conservative constitution). They have managed to disgrace corporations but not capital.

In the end, this is partly because they remain within the overall logic that dominates the bourgeois public sphere, which is as dependent on digital media as are oppositional movements. This is also because the lure of presence and the disaffection with representation that materializes itself in the crowd-sourced movement rests on the displacement of the question of ideology and thus of the labor of education. We have been overwhelmed by the slogan “The medium is the message.” The idea of communicability now hides within all media by virtue of a systematic misrecognition. Connection has come to stand for communication. The double dimension of language threatens to collapse as what Benjamin spoke of as the “immediacy of all mental communication” is perpetually rediscovered in the fantasy of a digital hook-up. And presencing—the appearance as one who can be seen to speak—offers itself in lieu of representation. To the extent that this becomes a generalized model of the political, we will have to ask what, if anything, is lost when the excess that inheres in that double disequilibrium described by Lévi-Strauss is nullified by the drive to postlinguistic presence in the image-sphere. If the social is at stake, as a certain anthropological analysis might suggest, the nature of collectivity will also come into question. Ironically, the specter of serial individuals—linked but unrelated, texting their opinions to anyone who might be reading—is the dystopia against which the bourgeois public sphere offers its pseudosolution. The task is to develop an opposition that is not merely the instantiation of that nightmarish projection.

### Notes

1. By *connectivity*, I mean anonymous and transient contact rather than relations born of prescribed and perduring structures.

2. A poll jointly taken by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Religion News Service claims that about one-third of all Americans are in agreement with either the OWS movement or the Tea Party. See Dan Mercia, "Survey: 3 in 10 Americans Identify with Occupy, Tea Party Movements," *CNN Belief Blog*, 17 November 2011, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/11/17/survey-a-third-of-americans-identify-with-occupy-tea-party-movements/>.

3. For a brief overview of the distributive picture, see Sylvia Allegretto, *The State of Working America's Wealth: Through Volatility and Turmoil, the Gap Widens*, EPI Briefing Paper no. 292 (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2011), [http://epi.3cdn.net/2a7ccb3e9e618f0bbc\\_3nm6idnax.pdf](http://epi.3cdn.net/2a7ccb3e9e618f0bbc_3nm6idnax.pdf).

4. See for example, Sally Kohn, "Now It's 'Occupy Foreclosed Homes,'" *CNN*, 9 December 2011, [http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/09/opinion/kohn-occupy-homes/index.html?hpt=hp\\_t2](http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/09/opinion/kohn-occupy-homes/index.html?hpt=hp_t2).

5. Negt and Kluge discern this misrepresentation even in the critical discourses about the public sphere, and not merely in bourgeois ideology. They write, "The characteristic weakness of virtually all forms of the bourgeois public sphere derives from this contradiction: namely that the bourgeois public sphere excludes substantial life-interests and nevertheless claims to represent society as a whole." Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, "*The Public Sphere and Experience: Selections*," trans. Peter Labanyi, *October* 46 (Autumn 1988): 63.

6. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010).

7. Seyla Benhabib, "Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation," *Signs* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 340.

8. Derrida's argument with J.L. Austin and Searle appears in Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 307–330.

9. Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Languages of Man" (1919), in *One-Way Street*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (New York: Verso, 1979), 109.

10. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949; Boston: Beacon, 1971), 30.

11. On the importance of translating the term *signifiant* as "the signifying" rather than "the signifier," see Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's Abilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

12. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Alan A. Wood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), sec. A782/B780, 650. In German, the first claim reads "Zu dieser Freiheit gehört denn auch die, seine Gedanken, seine Zweifel, die man sich nicht selbst auflösen kann, öffentlich zur Beurteilung auszustellen, ohne darüber für einen unruhigen und gefährlichen Bürger verschrien zu werden."

13. On the first, see Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," *New German Critique* 35 (1985): 97–131. As Fraser notes, Habermas's theory rests on a historical description that sees sovereign and personalistic power substituted by the administrative state and a formal capitalist economy, on one hand, and the bifurcation of the social world into public and private via the institution of the nucleated family, on the other (106). This public sphere is, for her, defined as "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk."

See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 57. See also Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Craig Calhoun, *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy, Habermas, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). On the question of heteronormativity as the basis for entering public discourse, see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002).

14. Spivak's original and revised arguments, as well as a historicization of the debates they inaugurated, can be found in Rosalind C. Morris, ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

15. In 1963, Thích Quảng Đức burned himself to death in Saigon to protest the persecution of Mahayana Buddhists by a Roman Catholic power in the south of the country. However, the image of the burning monk traveled globally, not merely as a contestation of Catholic oppression but as a sign of more generic anticolonialism, and the image was thus retrospectively mobilized in opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

16. Gerard Hauser, "Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricity of Public Opinion," *Communication Monographs* 65, no. 2 (June 1988): 83–107.

17. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

18. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–31.

19. McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

20. Archetypical in this tradition are Dana Villa, "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere," *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 3 (1992): 712; and Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745–58. Markell's defense of Habermas against the consensus theorists/critics appears in Patchen Markell, "Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere," *Constellations* 3 (1997): 377–400.

21. James T. Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). See also, Vicente Rafael, *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), esp. 17–35.

22. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1984).

23. Radhika Subramaniam, personal communication, 10 December 2011.

24. Negt and Kluge, 65.

25. Negt and Kluge, 67–68.

26. Vicente Rafael, "Generation Text: The Cell Phone and the Crowd in Recent Philippine History," *Connect: Art, Politics, Theory, Practice* 2 (2011): 123–132.

27. Clive Thompson, "The Year in Ideas: Smart Mobs," *New York Times*, 15 December 2002.

28. On the possible political force of music via the crowd, see my "Witchcraft," *Social Text* 95 (2008): 113–133.

29. Negt and Kluge, 64.

30. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).