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MAPPING THE PROTEST: STASIS, DYNAMISM, AND SPATIALITY IN OCCUPY MOVEMENT PROTESTS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, 2011–2012

Abstract

This article examines the topic of protest mapping during the rise of Occupy Wall Street in the United States in 2011–2012. It focuses on various practices of protest mapping, including a consideration of how space (public, urban, or of the protest camp) is represented in the visual sources discussed. It also addresses the qualitative difference between protest mapping and other mapping practices, as well as the categorization of protest mapping terms. Using the method of source analysis and online research, the article adopts, as its key concept for studying protest as a multi-threaded phenomenon, the notion of *détournement*. This concept was first described in 1957 by Gil Wolman and Guy Debord, and from the early 1960s was used as a creative method and also a revolutionary strategy by the avant-garde artistic group, the Situationist International. The categories of stasis, dynamism, and spatiality will also be important points of reference.

Keywords:

Occupy Wall Street, protest, mapping, spatiality, *détournement*

INTRODUCTION

In his famous work, *Mapping: A Critical Introduction to Cartography and GIS*, Jeremy Crampton presents a critical program of cartography. He writes:

For most of its history mapping has been the practice of powerful elites – the so-called “sovereign map.” (...) Map sovereignty is now being challenged by the emergence of a new populist cartography in which the public is gaining (some) access to the means of production of maps. This is certainly not an isolated development. It is part of a larger movement of counter-knowledges that are occurring in the face of ever-increasing corporatization of information (2010, p. 26).



The mapping of social movement protests undoubtedly belongs to the category of populist cartography and the mapping practices of the Occupy movement protests are particularly interesting in this context¹. This is for two reasons. First, the Occupy movement produced one of the biggest sit-in protests in the United States of America for the last two decades. Second, alongside the Arab Spring and anti-austerity protests in Europe², they have often been called “Twitter protests” or “Facebook protests” due to the extensive use of social media in their promotion and organization, which also included mapping practices, some of which could be considered pioneering.

It is also important to stress that because protests, as a part of everyday life, are subjected to intensifying processes of aestheticization and spectacularization, protest mapping is a practice worthy of research from not only a sociological but also an aesthetic perspective. As Jacques Rancière points out, the political is always of an aesthetic nature – politics regulates and manages the visible in terms of what can and cannot appear in the public sphere (2004, pp. 18–19). In a democracy based on the hegemony of liberalism and the technicization of politics, the foundation of which is consensus regarding the economic system, the mere appearance of protests drawing attention to the inequality and corruption of capitalism seems like an inconvenient disturbance. The aesthetic aspect of sit-in protests, with their own complex visual expression, is therefore closely related to the Occupy movement’s means of political and social influence and should be taken into consideration in the analysis of its history and impact.

Cartography has been critically evaluated in terms of its openness and discursiveness, inter alia, by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* and by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari via their concept of the rhizome and geophilosophy; and in the field of geography in critical cartography, introduced by Jeremy Crampton and John Krygier in 2005. It seems, however, that instead of scientific critical and analytical tools, the very practice of mapping itself (both artistic and non-artistic) is currently the site of cumulated subversive potential:

¹ When referring to mapping I mean not only the activity of making a map but also the process of creating a representation of space in a general sense. In this respect, this article is inspired by the so-called **deep mapping approach** – “an emerging approach at the crossroads of cartography and the humanities that aims to study places in depth through the mapping of a range of geographical data from multiple sources including from fiction, art, stories, and memories” (Ribeiro and Caquard, 2018).

² The biggest protests in Europe, known as “indignant protests,” took place in the United Kingdom, Greece, Portugal, and Spain. They started between the 5th and 15th of May 2011 and, alongside the events of the Arab Spring, inspired the rise of the Occupy Movement in the United States. In this article, I will refer to them, and especially to the Indignados movement in Spain, as a point of reference for Occupy, due to their similar course and methods of organization.

Unlike critical writing on cartography, which reflects on maps in the medium of written theory, artists “inhabit” the map to better distill, test, and expand its affordances (Ferdinand, 2019, p. 11).

Perhaps maps and mapping practices also have more potential because nowadays they are widely available and often intuitive tools, useful in terms of performing everyday tasks as well as in activist and artistic enterprises.

In this article, I would like to identify which mapping practices were used during the 2011–2012 protests, considering how the space of these particular protests was represented on maps and other iconographical sources, and addressing the question of how the mapping of protests differs from other mapping practices. Considering the complexity and multidimensionality of protest mapping (and the protest itself) through source analysis and online research, I will adopt the term “détournement” as the main tool for an aesthetic conceptualization of protest.

DÉTOURNEMENT AS A TOOL FOR REAPPROPRIATING AND REINVENTING THE PUBLIC SPACE

One of the most commonly used strategies during protests is that of détournement. The term itself was first conceptualized in the late 1950s by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman (2006), soon-to-be members of the Situationist International³, and it referred to the strategy of appropriating and reproducing any significant substance (an artwork, an image, a symbol, or any other “content”) operating in the conditions of the spectacularization of political and social life, occurring in both artistic practices and social phenomena. As the authors of the détournement manifesto mentioned, this method was not their invention, but a “generally widespread practice” (2006, p. 21).

Détournement as a revolutionary method, operating along these lines in the hegemonic conditions of spectacularization and widespread commodification, was designed as a critique from within the system. The strategy’s purpose lies in the “diversion of prefabricated aesthetic elements” that the spectacle endlessly produces, leading to the oversaturation of images and aestheticization of everyday life and human experience (*The International Situationniste*, Debord and Wolman, 2006, p. 13). Those images, appropriated and modified on a mass scale, were supposed to become weapons, working against the spectacle. Détournement is, in a sense, a method consisting of recycling the source and

³ According to the Situationist International chronology, this text should be identified as preceding the formation of the group. Nevertheless, its relevance for situationist theory and artistic practice allows it to be called situationist per se. It should be noted, however, that, in the year of its creation, the authors – Guy Debord and Gil Wolman – were still strongly influenced by letterism.

producing a new, and often critical, element through this subversive processing. When used as an interpretative category regarding the protest, *détournement* is useful for reflecting its dynamics and aesthetics, based mainly on replication, appropriation, and convention (Jeziorowska, 2021, p. 76). It can be traced within protest iconography, in the urban space that it appropriates and occupies, and even on an institutional level.

In the context of mapping practices, the most interesting one is of course the concept of *détourning* space. As Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani state, during protests, this occurs especially often when the space in which the protest takes place carries a symbolic or strategic meaning (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 199). This was precisely the case during the sit-down strikes of the Occupy movement, which took place in camps arranged in the representational parts of the city centers. During the Indignados protests in Madrid, Spain, the camp arose in Puerta del Sol; in the first Occupy Wall Street camp in New York, it emerged in Zuccotti Park (aka Liberty Plaza) in Manhattan⁴. Unlike Puerta del Sol, which is a public space where city events and also protests take place, Zuccotti Park is a privately owned public space (POPS), which means that although it is a private property, belonging to a real estate company called Brookfield Properties, it is legally required to be open to the public (Massey and Snyder, 2015, p. 92). Zuccotti Park is mostly frequented by workers of the Financial District. Despite the difference between the function and character of these two plazas, both of them attract considerable tourist traffic⁵.

Of course, *détourning* the strategic urban space is primarily a way of drawing public attention to the problems signaled by the protesters and making their resistance visible. As Judith Butler writes, discussing the 2011–2012 occupational protests: “These bodies who were organizing their basic needs in public were also petitioning the world to register what was happening there, to make its support known, and in that way to enter into revolutionary action itself” (2015, p. 97). Butler adds: “In this way, they formed themselves into images to be projected to all who watched” (2015, pp. 97–98). The step of aestheticizing

⁴ The camp on Puerta del Sol in Madrid has operated since 15th May 2011. The occupation in Zuccotti Park (aka Liberty Plaza) in Manhattan started on 17th September 2011. Protests were organized on a global scale – beyond the United States, Canada, Spain, Greece, and Portugal, they took place in Latin America, the Middle East, and North Africa, although they did not last there as long as in North America and Western Europe. Only 7 of the 36 state cities of the United States of America had no encampments at all (Rogers, 2011), and on average most of the camps stayed active for two to three months.

⁵ Contrary to claims by opponents of the movement, including mayor Michael Bloomberg, that the Occupy protest had a negative impact on tourism (Bartlett, 2011), the camps attracted even more tourist traffic than normal, which in turn caused controversy regarding the merchandizing of the protest and its possible outcome among participants. One of the protesters, Michael Pellagatti, created a private guided city tour about the history of the movement, which is still available to this day (Moynihan, 2015; Occupy Tour NYC).

– or spectacularizing – the protest and forming its reality into an image for people to look at after the physical space has already been appropriated, is the next phase of *détournement* strategy, and is followed by the creation of a new visual quality and propagandistic meaning. In the case of the Occupy protests, they were also striving to build a community model based on direct democracy and the principle of radical empathy. The very formation and sustenance of this community, conceived as a direct critique of the late-capitalist system and austerity politics, was the main goal of the protest. Therefore, the protesters did not make more specific demands than the pursuit of economic justice and the restoration of democracy, nor did they try to develop political capital⁶. In terms of the distinction proposed by Della Porta and Diani, the strategy of the Occupy movement was more cultural than political:

Although the forms of action adopted concentrated to a large extent on the political system, it should be noted that movements also made use (to differing degrees) of cultural strategies aimed at changing value systems. While political strategies seek, above all, to change external realities, cultural strategies seek an interior transformation (2006, p. 170).

On the plans of the camp in Liberty Plaza⁷, it can be seen that the camp was organized in specific sectors, reflecting the divisions of working groups and committees. The main organizational rules of the Occupy movement camps in general were the physical occupation of space, striving for camp self-sufficiency, decision-making based on democratic consensus, and voluntary work in different working groups and committees. Among the committees, which focused mainly on the practical matters of sustaining the functioning of the camp, there were units working in information, media, security, medicine, catering, sanitation, childcare, library, and arts⁸. Not only was there a dedicated space for making protest art, but it was marked on nearly every camp map, just as the spaces for childcare or medical care. This demonstrates the importance of art during the 2011–2012 protests:

Some even considered the entire movement to be art and believed that the camps were “permanent monuments to the injustice and inequality of America’s society” (Loewe, 2015, p. 190).

⁶ As a matter of fact, this decision was the strongest axis of criticism of the movement.

⁷ The plans used for the analysis were retrieved from The Occupy Wall Street Archive Working Group, which is currently part of the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, and from two articles by Jonathan Massey and Brett Snyder (2012a; 2012b).

⁸ It appears that the advanced mapping of protests of the Black Lives Matter movement were modeled on Occupy and enriched with mapping of the affiliated artistic projects: <https://blm-map.com/>.

Distinctive and at the same time central to the entire structure of the movement were the General Assemblies, which brought together protesters who lived in the camps with those who spent only part of their time there, for meetings devoted to the ideological and theoretical aspects of the movement, as well as the day-to-day affairs of camp life. The formula of the meetings was open – anyone could speak, and the crowd communicated through the human microphone method. Other than this, the protesters gathered in working groups to discuss more abstract or specific issues in smaller circles⁹.

The camp plans indicate that their organization was thoughtful. While the individual tents were often relocated, the locations of the main points of reference, such as those providing medical assistance, childcare, and information, remained fixed. During these particular protests, the static and dynamic qualities coexisted and, most probably, contributed to creating the peculiar atmosphere and aesthetics of protest. Moreover, it is important to stress that the boundaries of the camp were fluid and unfixed. These borders were moved by the protesters themselves, moving freely around the city and establishing contacts with other protest centers. The network of dependencies and directions of exchange is best outlined by Marlisa Wise in her study dedicated to mapping the functioning of the camp kitchen in Zuccotti Park (2021). Moreover, the protests had their extension in the digital sphere. The dynamic and non-hierarchical aspects of the protest were reflected in its spatial organization, and with it on the related maps and mapping practices.

PROTEST MAPPING

Before moving on to describe the ways of mapping during the Occupy protests, it is worth pausing on the definition and theory of the practice of protest mapping in general. In order to answer the question of how the mapping of protests alters from other mapping practices, this section will repeatedly refer to Martine Drozd's article on protest mapping from the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, in which the author presents the most important distinctions, definitions, and categorizations regarding the subject (2020, pp. 367–378).

Protest mapping practice has two main distinguishing features. The first is the peculiar dynamics and ephemerality of the protest itself. The mapping of a protest requires a consideration of its dynamics – the multiple directions of movement, the division of participants into different groups, unexpected events, crowd psychology, but also the characteristic landform. It is important to stress that in the case of protest maps, the territory depicted will almost always

⁹ In their working groups, the participants discussed such topics as education, culture, environment, economy, society, politics, feminism, migration and mobility, science, technology, and religion.

be a city landscape, as protest is inherently connected to urban spaces (Kowalewski, 2016, pp. 7–29). In terms of the immediate capturing of ever-changing circumstances, protest mapping resembles battle mapping in many ways, especially when we take into account the struggle between the protesters and the police (or other disciplinary forces), which, after the de-escalation of police violence in the 1970s and 80s, grew stronger again in the 90s (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, pp. 220–221). It is worth mentioning that during the protest this struggle between protesters and police can take the form of a series of mutual *détournements*, which often turns into a kind of game between the two parties¹⁰.

The second important feature of the practice of protest mapping is its critical potential. Drozd considers this when she names three different goals of maps of protest: to locate the place of the rally; to criticize the current state of affairs (mainly regarding common space and social issues); and to promote alternative uses of space (2020, p. 367). However, in a broader sense, protest mapping is critical not only of the existing social order but also of cartography as a power/knowledge apparatus, while maintaining a similar visual character. Thus, in a self-reporting critical reference, it resembles the *détournement* strategy.

While writing about emancipatory cartography practices, Drozd identifies their four variants: memorial self-cartographies; advocacy cartography; mactivism; and postcolonial mapping (2020, p. 377). In the context of the 2011–2012 protests, especially interesting are the second and third practices: advocacy cartography is a bottom-up practice, used by local communities to promote political change by mapping inhabited territory. It is focused on representing social issues and depicting land as more a habitat that is subject to change than an object of management and exploitation. Mactivism, on the other hand, is described by Drozd as a “weaponization of maps for protest” (2020, p. 376). The researcher identifies it mainly with real-time mapping of the space of undergoing protest through social media. This real-time mapping, most often performed by multiple users at the same time, is called crowdmapping, as it is the mechanism of crowdsourcing within the field of digital cartography¹¹.

¹⁰ That was the case when the Charging Bull, a bronze statue on Wall Street, a symbol (or rather an anti-idol) of the Occupy protest, became fenced in, and was guarded by the police for over a year after the beginning of the movement, even though it had never been vandalized by occupiers (Jeziorowska, 2021, p. 73). Further interesting dynamics developed between Occupy Museums, one of the working groups of the Occupy movement (who mainly criticized the privatization and commodification of cultural facilities and poor working conditions in the arts), and the New York cultural institutions, such as the Museum of Modern Art, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Opera, which the group often visited to organize protests and performances (Occupy Museums. Archive site for NYC activist group, 2011).

¹¹ Among the practices of protesting over the Internet, one might also include mail-bombing – the deliberate mass sending of e-mails by network users to overload a mailbox, website, or server; and netstriking, which is essentially the same method, without the sending of e-mails. Interestingly, in spatial terms, it is often compared to a march, blocking the roads (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 190).

This agonistic and militaristic approach of Drozd suggests that the core characteristic of maptivism and crowdmapping is obviously their dynamism. Thanks to maps' ability to change, evolve, and update, they can reflect complex structures of protests, effectively plan escape routes, and react to spontaneous events. Furthermore, Drozd thinks of maptivism as an important strategy for the democratization of space:

The maps that circulate over social media play an essential role in democratizing public spaces. They help to locate a protest march or a rally and send alerts to evade police repression. They are instrumental in claiming and occupying physical space to voice discontent and protest, which is a core trait of a healthy democratic process (2020, p. 375).

It is also worth noting that Drozd mentions the Occupy and Indignados movements as examples of maptivism being put to work during protests (2020, p. 376).

PROTEST MAPPING IN THE INDIGNADOS AND OCCUPY MOVEMENTS

Among the protest maps and mapping practices, three general types can be distinguished, which lean, respectively, toward a utilitarian, a conceptual, or an illustrative function. The most useful in terms of organizing and sustaining the 2011–2012 protests were maptivism and crowdmapping, enabling the participants to use real-life mapping through social media to avoid being caught by the police and to inform each other during rallies of undergoing events, marches, and meetings.

In these cases, the most commonly used map was the OccupyMap, built by the protesters themselves, and specifically by Tech Ops, a working group of the New York City General Assembly (Massey and Snyder, 2015, p. 94). It consisted not only of the map, but also an updated timeline, a function to attach photos, a list of incidents happening during protests, and a list of articles featuring protests in media with links. There was also a browser, from which it was possible to search for results by the name of the event, location, hashtags, or keywords¹². The other online maps with crowdsourced data appeared on such platforms as Take the Square, US Day of Rage, Ushahidi, and OccupyWallSt.org (Massey and Snyder, 2015, p. 93). As noted by Massey and Snyder:

¹² The OccupyMap, formerly available on Occupy.net site, no longer works. It is possible to see its functions and design on a YouTube tutorial uploaded in June 2012: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7djcMM_SvXM.

Occupy crowdmaps visualized landscapes fundamentally distinct from those visible in city streets. In counterpoint to the intense attention paid to Zuccotti Park, these virtual geographies redefined the public of Occupy Wall Street as a dispersed set of agents linked by online communication channels (2015, p. 94).

It is also important to stress that the protesters aimed to utilize open-source tools whenever possible, although popular social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr were also used extensively to increase reach.

In addition to the abovementioned crowdmapping and maptivist practices, the utilitarian category should also include both digital and material plans and maps of camps created to inform participants about the rules in the camp and to facilitate orientation. An interesting example is the “Map of September 17 (S17) Direct Actions” from 2012, a flyer prepared for the action on the first anniversary of Occupy Wall Street, which included blockades and demonstrations in the whole Financial District. For this occasion, the map was divided into four zones: education; 99 percent; eco; and debt zone. This time, a détourned Wall Street map came with a new arbitrary delineation of symbolic boundaries and names of separated areas. The map is supplemented with instructions for the participants, a legend with marked corporate targets, and an intentionally vague description of planned actions.

Common among the maps and plans of protests of 2011–2012 are also those that are used not to guide the users, but rather to conceptualize and explain ideas, like mind maps. Some of the concept maps of the protest, most probably made by the protesters themselves or by supporters of the movement, and which portrayed the main objectives and contexts of the protests or presented the ideas and organizational structure of the newly established camp, were also created in MindMeister, an online application for mind mapping (Kirchgrabe, n.d.; Julia P, n.d.). A particularly interesting example of concept mapping, which, by the way, is also one of the most important documents of the New York Occupy protest, is the Declaration of The Occupation of New York City. It was written collectively as the movement’s manifesto by the New York City General Assembly of Occupy Wall Street at the beginning of the occupation. New York artist Rachel Schragis transformed the text into a flowchart¹³, resembling a mind map or a diagram, which was later printed as a poster and handed out to protesters at Zuccotti Park (Flowchart of the Declaration). According to the text of the Declaration, the chart presents the grievances as a concentric net.

¹³ Socially engaged, educational flowcharts are Schragis’ main medium of creative process. Her artistic practice often situates itself simultaneously in the area of activism and art-based research and interestingly, in the context of détournement practice, she calls herself a “visual strategist” (Sarbib, 2021).

Finally, during 2011–2012, protest maps and mapping were also part of the protest iconography, serving as illustrations of the occupied space. One example is the poster promoting the protest organized for the first anniversary of Occupy Wall Street, on 17th September 2012 (*Poster promoting OWS protests at Zuccotti Park*, n.d.), which features a map of lower Manhattan, carrying the caption: “Follow the money... All roads lead to Wall Street!”, and the Occupy Wall Street and Black Monday hashtags. In this case, the map embodies the spatial target of the protest, and alongside the text it refers critically to the globalized economic system, in which Wall Street centralizes the market, just as Rome centralized antique pathways¹⁴.

Whether their function is utilitarian, conceptual, or illustrative, all of these practices are complementary and indispensable to the strategy of détourning the physical space, as they reinforce the message, justify actions taken, and help to form the collective identity of the protesters.

In addition, concept mapping and mind mapping are also popular tools among scholars and academics researching various aspects of the 2011–2012 protests. In this case, maps can be part of the research conducted during the course of protests – such as the two comparable maps used to present the data in Rob Daurio’s (2011) substantial study on the transformation of the protest in Zuccotti Park during the first two months of its activity. Alternatively, maps also support research on protests carried out post factum, for instance in Paul Thagard’s analysis of the cognitive-affective structures of political ideologies, where he maps emotional values attributed to core concepts of the Occupy Wall Street protests in the context of anarchist ideology (2015, p. 57, fig. 3.5). Despite the fact that the aforementioned maps were devoid of direct influence or, in a sense, even “participation” in the protest, it is certainly appropriate to count these examples as part of the broad concept of protest mapping.

CONCLUSION

Modern ways of mapping protest, based largely on online mapping, and especially crowdmapping, are able to capture protests’ changeability and ephemerality. Digital tools were used on an enormous scale during the Occupy movement, yet the main objective of the protests was an occupation strike targeting the central nodes of the city. The contrast between the static occupation

¹⁴ Actually, the camps were often compared to cities operating within cities (Daurio, 2011), and they were called republics by the protesters (Bienvenidas a Republica Independiente). Puerta del Sol was referred to by different puns on posters, leaflets, and banners as “Huerta del Sol” (meaning “garden of Sun”), “Plaza Solución” (that is, the square of solution) or the new Bastille. As expressions of symbolic appropriation, re-naming the plaza with the use of word play and evoking the symbol of the French Revolution can also be considered as détourning practices.

and the dynamics of everyday life in camps full of protesters produced a specific hybrid quality to these protests, which was strengthened even further by their dual presence in the physical and virtual spheres¹⁵.

As one of the protesters within the Indignados movement observed:

During one of the first days of the occupation of the plaza (before it had really consolidated into the encampment), people started chanting: “we’re not on Facebook, we’re in the plaza.” I look over at the kid next to me, one of the loudest chanters, uploading a picture to Facebook while chanting. This isn’t as much of a contradiction as it might appear to be. Of course, we’re in the plaza, and we’re also in Facebook, and the plaza is on Facebook and we’re in the Facebook plaza. Our power lies in that we can go from Facebook to the plaza and back again whenever we want (*Part 2: what is acampada sol?* 2011).

Thus, although access to new mapping practices, such as digital sources of information and messaging, has certainly had an impact on the individual experience of participating in a protest and, perhaps, in increasing efficiency in respect of organization matters, it has not fundamentally changed the way people protest: “Bodies in the street still matter for commanding attention and galvanizing engagement” (Massey and Snyder, 2012b).

The hybrid ambivalence and complexity of protest make it challenging to survey from an aesthetic perspective. The three aspects of *détournement* that I have discussed in this paper – mainly the spatial, but occasionally the iconographical and institutional too – are useful as interpretative categories, helping to structure and conceptualize the multifaceted practice of protest mapping, especially in terms of the critical and subversive potential that it shares with *détournement* itself.

¹⁵ The concepts of alternative spatiality and hybrid space that would apply to the camps of the Occupy protests are especially important in the work of Adriana de Souza e Silva, who researches the interconnections between mobile networking technologies and social practices. She defines hybrid spaces as “mobile spaces, created by the constant movement of users who carry portable devices continuously connected to the Internet and to other users,” which alter the experience of space completely in terms of social interactions, as well as in access to information (2006, p. 262).

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