

Taking Up Space: Anthropology and embodied protest

Drawing on experiences of the McGill University student occupations, *Sheehan Moore* calls for an anthropology of the body in protest.

On November 10, 2011, two students hid in a bathroom in the James Administration building at McGill University in Montreal. When they received word that an anti-tuition hike protest was reaching the campus's main Roddick Gates, they let twelve others in through the building's back door and together ascended to the fifth floor. The students, some of them masked or hooded, blocked doors with their bodies and proceeded to occupy administrative offices for a total of eight minutes before being forcibly removed by McGill Security.¹ Two days later in a letter to *The McGill Daily*, the fourteen occupiers wrote:

By crossing the boundaries that authorities have forced on us, by taking up space where our presence is prohibited and our agency denied, we triggered a response that exposes the necessary violence with which the hierarchical power structure confronting students is enforced. [...] The narratives of the corporate media, the police, and the administration will aim at a common end: a return to the status quo in which they control our spaces

*and our bodies. But we are engaged in a struggle that is far from over. We must continue to move beyond the liberal model of 'discourse' that has only served to maintain unjust power relations and control. Acting boldly and defying prescribed boundaries, we subvert the logic of submission.*²

The November 10 occupation, as well as the occupation of the same building in February 2012, can be located within a long tradition of similar protests at universities that dates back to the early 1960s. Additionally, both incidents arrived at a time when occupation loomed large in the public consciousness: from the revolutionary encampments in Cairo's Tahrir Square, to the Indignants in Madrid's Puerta del Sol, to the Occupy movement, protesters across the world began moving into spaces and refusing to leave.

Occupations differ from other forms of protest like marches and rallies primarily in their temporal and spatial persistence, and in this sense they allow for more of an explicit meditation on the role of the persisting,

protesting body. However, the majority of literature on the topic, as I outline below, tends to foreground the discursive dimensions of protests and occupations, focusing almost exclusively on demands and goals as the only "whys" for protest. Through this fairly limited analytic lens, we can easily lose sight of an important bodily dimension of protest that exceeds the stated or assumed politics of a demonstration or occupation. When we try to understand only the causes and intended effects of protest, we obscure their material nature and erase the physical bodies that enter – out of perceived necessity – into spaces that are forbidden to them. What would it mean to treat forms of protest like occupations not only as declarative – i.e., as political statements – but also as embodied and spatial practice?³

After a short overview of the rise of university occupations, the historical tactics they draw on, and the context in which they emerged as a form of protest, I turn to the two McGill occupations

during the 2011-2012 academic year, outlining the events and the general shape of the occupiers' discourse. My primary aim here is to suggest some ways an anthropology of embodiment might approach occupations theoretically and methodologically, and specifically, how the way occupiers past and present talk about bodies can point us towards a reading of occupation as a bodily practice rather than merely political discourse.

A reflection on the role of bodies persisting in spaces where they are forbidden from doing so is crucial to understanding why protesters continue to choose occupation as a tactic. To this end, I draw on theoretical work by Judith Butler and Edward Soja that locates meaningful and material bodies in contested and constructed spaces, and argue that such interventions may be thought about as opening up the 'political' or an 'alter' politics, as the terms are

used by Miriam Ticktin and Ghassan Hage, respectively.

A brief history of occupation

On December 2, 1964, approximately one thousand students and other supporters of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley entered Sproul Hall, then the seat of the university's administration, in what would become the first modern occupation of a university as a means of political protest on record.⁴ This was the occasion of Mario Savio's famous call to action, issued from the steps of the hall, which related the protesters' political convictions to certain political imperatives impressed on their bodies:

There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even tacitly take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machines will be prevented from working at all.⁵

From the beginning, then, university occupations have been presented by those engaging in them as a means of intervening physically into the prescribed means of



Photo by Farid Attar Rifai.

A banner dropped by occupiers on the fifth floor of McGill's administration building on November 10, 2011.

participation and decision-making – the ‘machine’. With these traditional avenues of

by other labour organizations over the coming years for their effectiveness not

the association of sit-ins with labour and civil rights movements and with growing nationwide opposition to the war in Vietnam – as well as from the increasing diversity of the student population. During this postwar period, in the United States as well as in Canada, universities saw a massive surge in enrolment encouraged by the allocation of public funds. This ‘golden age’ of universities, full of the promises of education’s democratisation and a learned populace, saw university enrolment in

Canada increase more than tenfold from 1956 to 1966, with comparable rates in the United States.⁹ In part, this meant universities became – relatively speaking – more accessible and open for many of those who historically had been excluded from the ranks of its students and faculty – including women, people of colour, and those whose class background barred them from elite campuses.¹⁰ Thus, while university protest up to this point in the North American context had focused for the most part on issues of internal governance, most often taking the form of more or less harmless pranks, the post-war student body increasingly recognized itself as connected to broader social movements beyond the campus gates – anti-war movements, civil rights, labour, and so on.¹¹ Out of this background, and with a student body growing in



Photo by Victor Tangermann.

Riot police confront protesters outside the occupied administration building on November 10, 2011.

democratic opposition non-functioning or foreclosed upon, dissent becomes, necessarily, an embodied action for those who decide they have no recourse except to occupy – to prevent the university machines from working at all.

In the decades leading up to the Berkeley revolt, occupations and similar tactics had gained increasing traction as a form of protest: university occupations can trace their tactical roots to the first sit-down strikes in the US in the early twentieth century. These were initiated first by workers unionised under the International Workers of the World (IWW), including General Electric employees in New York in 1906, and were quickly adopted as a tactic

only in ceasing work, but also blocking replacement workers from entering factories and continuing production.⁶ Out of this tradition, and beginning in the 1940s, sit-in protests became associated with the civil rights movement in the United States, spreading rapidly across the American South following the February 1960 sit-ins at a Woolworths in Greensboro, North Carolina.⁷ But before Berkeley, student occupations of university spaces were virtually unheard of, not yet figuring in the ‘tactical repertoires’ of student protesters.⁸

The emergence of occupation at this moment in California likely resulted from both the contemporary context of protest and activism –

its militancy, the Berkeley occupation became, in the words of former Berkeley sociologist Seymour Lipset, the 'prototype event of the student movement'.¹² A wave of university occupations followed the Berkeley revolt: the London School of Economics in 1966-67; Columbia University, McGill University, and the Sorbonne in 1968; Concordia University and City College of New York the following year; and recurrently in the decades since.

While the number of occupations has fluctuated with the political climate, a recent upsurge in the number and visibility of occupations has followed the implementation of austerity measures (most often entailing tuition hikes) resulting from the 2008 global financial crisis: students initiated austerity-related occupations of university buildings in the 2008-2009 academic year in the UK, California, and New York, multiple anti-government occupations in the UK in 2010, and occupations of University of California campuses in 2011 and 2012. Concurrent with a philosophy that went global through the Occupy Wall Street movement, recent university occupations have shown a markedly decreased interest in the formulation of specific demands that must be met

as conditions of an end to the protest. Instead, many of those occupying have rallied under the slogan, 'Occupy everything, demand nothing'.¹³

2011-2012: Occupations at McGill

In total, fourteen students occupied sections of the fifth floor of the James building on November 10, 2011. During those eight minutes before their interception by the McGill Security Team, the occupiers explored the principal's office and adjoining rooms, dropping from a window a banner that read '10 Nov. Occupons McGill' ('Let's Occupy McGill').¹⁴ After their removal they negotiated their amnesty with administrators, as well

as the amnesty of those who had subsequently and spontaneously occupied the second floor of the building in solidarity. Across campus, certain other buildings were put on card-key access only, preventing protesters and bystanders from entering buildings surrounding the square while riot police used batons, pepper spray, and tear gas to disperse the large support rally that had formed outside.¹⁵ In their letter to *The McGill Daily*, quoted above, the fourteen occupiers made it clear that their occupation had been without demands, and that it was instead a response to the deterioration of lines of communication on campus, repression of striking non-academic workers,¹⁶ the lack of student representation in

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Photo by Victor Tangermann.

Students occupy the lobby of the administration building in solidarity with the #6party occupation happening upstairs.

governance, and austerity measures advocated by a Board of Governors populated by CEOs, real estate moguls, McKinsey & Co. directors and mining executives. The occupiers specifically link their actions to both the Quebec-wide student movement and to the increasing neoliberalisation of society, in which they identify the university as a key player. 'It is time to

of what the administration deems acceptable'.¹⁷

Almost exactly three months later, on February 7, 2012, twenty-three students occupied the office of Deputy Provost Morton Mendelson on the sixth floor of the James building in what would come to be known as the #6party occupation, in reference to the hashtag used for Twitter updates. Unlike

results of two referendum votes on the existence of the Quebec Public Interest Research Group (QPIRG) and Radio CKUT – both of which votes administrators had nullified the previous month – and that the Deputy Provost resign.¹⁸ As on November 10, the planned #6party occupation prompted a spontaneous occupation of a lower level of the building: upon hearing that students were on the sixth floor, a group of students, myself included, entered the building's lobby around 11:30am, but were blocked from staircases and elevators by security. Over the course of the evening, sixty to one hundred students and professors came and went freely in the lobby, teaching courses, holding informal discussions, and serving food, even after an eviction notice was served at 3:30pm. Around 8:45pm, a member of McGill's Security Services announced to those occupying the lobby that they were free to leave, but would no longer be allowed to reenter.¹⁹ Roughly twenty students spent the night sleeping on the lobby floor, forced to use bottles and eventually a cooler as toilets in the absence of accessible lobby-level washrooms. At 11:30 next morning, the remaining students chose to leave the lobby of their own accord en masse, and were greeted by a support rally and reporters. The sixth-floor occupation, meanwhile,

Image by Vincent Tao.



A poster that appeared across campus during the #6party occupation.

enter their space,' they wrote. 'Occupation is a means of expressing our dissent outside of the boundaries

the November 10 occupation, #6party occupiers issued specific demands: that the administration recognize the

continued until the morning of February 12, when the McGill administration asked Montreal police to evict the remaining nine students (the others had gradually left in the preceding days).

Neither of the occupation's demands were ultimately met. But notably, when talking with student occupiers about #6party now, the conversation is almost always about the experience of the occupation

the act of occupation, on the fact that occupation can signify – can be meaningful – *in excess* of political declarations or demands. The physical, embodied action itself is a crucial aspect of this meaningfulness. In what follows, I suggest a methodological approach to occupation that centres on the role of the body in protest, arguing that bodily practices, independent of declared demands, can work to create alternative political

*are not. In this sense critical sociology uncovers social forces and social relations that are believed to be already having a causal effect on us regardless of whether we are aware of them or not (class relations, gender relations, etc.), critical anthropology invites us to become aware of and to animate certain social forces and potentials that are lying dormant in our midst. In so doing it incites what was not causal to become so.*²¹

Among these potentials are those 'emerging social spaces

riot police used batons, pepper spray, and tear gas to disperse the large support rally that had formed outside

– nearly universally viewed as positive and exciting – rather than about its technical *failure* in terms of actual demands. This is not to say that supporting both CKUT and QPIRG was not a priority for the lobby and sixth floor occupations – there were constant negotiations with administrators, and the bulk of the discussion and media coverage at the time made it clear that the actions taken were taken to defend student organisations from administrative overreach.²⁰ But what sticks with those who occupied now, over a year later, is the act itself and not the immediate motives behind it. This could be dismissed as self-centredness on the part of occupiers, but I think it is worth lingering here on the feelings people have towards

situations.

Occupation as embodied practice

In thinking about what those alternatives may be, I want to take up some of Ghassan Hage's proposals for a *critical anthropology* directed towards the 'radical political imaginary'. To this end, Hage draws a distinction between a critical sociology and a critical anthropology:

Critical sociology invites or initiates a reflexive analytical act that induces an understanding: it invites us to see how our social world is constituted and the way it can be unmade and remade by us. Critical anthropology, appropriately enough, is more akin to the shamanic act of inducing a haunting; indeed it encourages us to feel haunted at every moment of our lives by what we are/could be that we

that lie outside the existing order of governmentality and intelligibility and requiring an imaginative politics that can think them in their difference'.²² Approaching these spaces of the radical imaginary through anthropological inquiry is in many ways a turn towards some of the discipline's originating impulses, towards alterity and alternative. Reflecting on the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Hage writes, 'it is more than a "the Amazonians have their reality and we have our reality" argument. It does mean the latter, but it also means that their reality speaks to ours. It haunts us with the possibility that we, as well, live in multiple realities'.²³

To focus on only the demands or the lack of

demands presented by occupiers is to read these occupations as if they were simply petitions to political figures, albeit petitions signed in the flesh. We risk missing important dimensions of radical practice when our approach is limited so narrowly to the policies and practices that occupations oppose, and to weighing their chosen tactics against their demands. Yet this has taken up the majority of commentary about occupations at McGill and beyond.²⁴ We can locate this merely political discursive analysis within what Hage calls a politics of ‘anti’ – that is, a politics that is primarily deconstructive and oppositional.²⁵ ‘Anti’ politics sits on the other

to protest is, after all, almost always to oppose or to resist, and the politics of protest are, on the surface at least, ‘anti.’

But to get to try and understand occupation anthropologically requires attending to alterity, looking for the ‘otherness-within-us’ to which Hage returns repeatedly, and extending our view beyond mere politics. It is useful here to draw on the distinction Miriam Ticktin makes between politics and the political in her work on humanitarianism: the former is ‘a set of practices by which order is created and maintained’ while the latter ‘refers to the disruption of an established order’.²⁶ *Politics* – including the oppositional politics

imaginary, can help us approach occupation in a way that is attentive not only to the politics of the action – the demands, the policies or machinery being explicitly opposed, and so on – but also to the possibility of the political and to the challenges occupying bodies pose to the current parameters set on politics.

In this sense, the body is central to the work occupations do in shifting from ‘politics’ to the ‘political’. Consistently, university occupiers and their supporters frame their bodily transgression of campus spaces as being a response to the failure of available lines of communication, dissent, and participation – that is, to the failure of politics in Ticktin’s sense of the word. For instance, citing a crackdown on various forms of dissent by McGill’s upper administration – from injunctions against striking workers, to disciplinary charges brought against students engaging in peaceful teach-ins,²⁷ to security personnel filming faculty and students participating in approved forms of non-disruptive protest²⁸ – McGill professors Hasana Sharp and Will Roberts wrote on November 14, 2011, of the necessity of the occupation that had occurred four days prior:

In 1997, students occupied the same offices as last

Politics ...allows for contention within certain given parameters; the political, on the other hand, challenges the very foundations of those parameters.

end of a spectrum from an ‘alter’ politics, which addresses itself to open-ended alternative physical and political realities. And while almost any political or social movement will tend to incorporate both, providing an oppositional critique while opening up alternatives, this latter aspect is easily overlooked. Asking *why* about protest tends to mean merely *in response to what* :

of, for instance, a liberal democratic party system – allows for contention within certain given parameters; the *political*, on the other hand, challenges the very foundations of those parameters. The rough equivalencies between Ticktin’s categories here and Hage’s anti/alter politics, as well as his understanding of the open-ended ‘alter’-ness of the radical political

*week. They came with a list of demands, stayed for three days, and left peaceably when the administration refused to negotiate on the demands. The occupiers last week made no demands. Occupy everything, demand nothing. That is their watchword. This is not the frightening or confusing development people seem to think it is. If occupations do not make demands, that means they are not engaging in mercenary activity. The occupiers were not holding the Principal's office hostage. They just want to talk and be heard. They occupy to short-circuit the usual channels by which concerns get mediated and diluted, and arguments get muted to the point of inaudibility.*²⁹

Sharp and Roberts, echoing the rhetoric of occupiers at McGill and at universities in North America and Europe over the past five years or so, assert the centrality of occupation in light of the shortcomings of 'the usual channels'. By *physically* occupying a space without issuing demands, protesters intervene not through these channels, but *into* them, blocking them from operating and, in that very action, opening up a sort of free-space for the possibilities of new kinds of communication and participation in the university.

It is significant that the administration-sanctioned modes of participation at McGill are almost entirely immaterial (in both senses of the word). They take the

form of websites where questions to the principal can be up- or down-voted, live-streamed videos of Senate meetings that have limited opportunity for physical attendance or else are closed to spectators altogether, and online voting on referenda about student life. When students appear physically to protest the insufficiency of these channels by sitting in the offices in which the real decision-making is assumed to take place, it becomes crucial to direct our attention to the way their presence asserts itself against this immateriality.³⁰ Doing so

arguing that theoretical attention to matter and embodiment means situating the body as constructed, but acknowledging the conditions and lived 'realness' of this constructed body.³²

Butler has also recently suggested some ways to approach the embodiment of occupation. In a talk given in Venice in September 2011, just days before Occupy Wall Street pitched their first tents, she drew on the recent Egyptian revolution in order to propose a politics based in a shared precarity of the

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situates our methodological approach within the kind of materialism that Lock and Farquhar identify as central to an anthropological regard for the body. Unlike the dualistic or Cartesian materialism that has been theoretically dominant since the Enlightenment, or the empiricist and positivistic materialism critiqued by anthropologies of science, a materialism of embodiment is attentive to even these 'empirical' bodily practices as sites of meaning-making inextricable from human experience.³¹ Judith Butler helps to reconcile post-structuralist and feminist critiques of a supposedly pre-social materialism with this new materialism,

physical body. Butler argues here that when protests manifest and persist in space, 'the very public character of the space is being disputed and even fought over when these crowds gather':

*So though these movements have depended on the prior existence of pavement, street, and square, and have often enough gathered in squares, like Tahrir, whose political history is potent, it is equally true that the collective actions collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture.*³³

Similarly, in 'seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments', occupiers make claims to the material supports of

certain aspects of life at the university – participation, political appearance, and being heard – that are otherwise perceived as being denied to them. Butler takes up and reconfigures Hannah Arendt’s notion of the ‘space of appearance’, in part as a means of understanding how ‘power operates prior to any performative power exercised by a plurality’ to structure public and private spaces in ways that make political appearance difficult to impossible for certain bodies.³⁴ In the case of the McGill occupations, we can think here about the strategies of power that constrain the parameters of politics (again, in Ticktin’s terminology) to the realm of the nonphysical. Occupations that either make no demands – or that are remembered one year later for reasons other than the failure or success of their demands – remain

Goldsmiths in London:

[T]he symbolic meaning of seizing these buildings is that these buildings belong to the public, to public education; it is precisely the access to public education which is being undermined by fee and tuition hikes and budget cuts; we should not be surprised that the protest took the form of seizing the buildings, performatively laying claim to public education, insisting on gaining literal access to the buildings of public education precisely at a moment, historically, when that access is being shut down.³⁵

The performative capacity of bodies that Butler draws on here is key to understanding the material aspects of occupation. It is this performativity that opens up the political by redefining, if only for minutes or days, the limits on politics at the university. In the case of the #6party, the use of the

they refused to leave, one student is quoted in *The McGill Daily* citing precisely the failure of conventional decision-making as a motive for occupation: ‘We have these discussions over and over. [...] The point is that all these decisions come to nothing. Everybody knows we’ve done this repeatedly, so we’re not going to do this again. [...] We came to have a party.’³⁶

In recognizing the way that the performative body can intervene in spaces to open them up to new sorts of political existence, anthropology is well poised to build theoretical bridges across disciplines, and particularly to a tradition of critical geography. The ‘spatial turn’ that emerged in the humanities and social sciences most notably from the work of Marxist geographer and sociologist

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We came to have a party’

meaningful for the way that the bodies involved, through their physical, spatial transgression, make political claims or demands that are inarticulable in the conventional discursive sense. Butler addresses this possibility, alluding to the then-recent occupation of university buildings at

word ‘party’ rather than ‘occupation’ to refer to their actions is in part a gesture towards the openness to a new sense of the political that those participating attempted to engage. When McGill Provost Anthony Masi tried to talk to those in the lobby during #6party about why they were there and why

Henri Lefebvre has led to a body of literature on the geographies of protest (especially in relation to urban space).³⁷ The work of geographer Edward Soja, which addresses the spatiality of social justice movements in large urban centres, is valuable in approaching occupation here for its notion

of ‘spatial consciousness’ – defined as ‘an awareness that oppression, marginality, and inequality are produced and reproduced to a significant degree through the new urbanization processes and the restructured socio-spatialities of urbanism’.³⁸ Mapping this urban geographical term onto practices of collective struggle and contention within smaller, more institutional settings like universities helps direct our attention towards the lived physical and material dimensions of protest – those aspects of protest that are inextricably linked to the politics at hand, but which may not be accounted for in a merely discursive account that aims to envelope only the ‘facticity’ of an

that politics sustain, then we need to examine, similarly, the parameters imposed on our uses of space and the ways political protest disrupts those prescribed uses. What kinds of thinking shape the parameters for what is possible within the spaces of the university? How does protest create new possibilities? These questions seem foundational to an anthropological approach that takes the embodied, ‘political’ dimensions of occupation seriously.

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Occupation is necessary, writes former McGill student Erin Reunions in a 1998 alternative student handbook,³⁹ when students are no longer able to participate and

participate, feel, and hope differently, even if only briefly. When it is over, we might be ‘haunted’, to use Hage’s word, by what was made possible during those minutes, days, or months, even as the immediate causes of the occupation fade from memory.

I’ve attempted to outline a way of thinking about occupation that pays specific attention to the role of the bodily in collective dissent. The work of Hage and Ticktin is central here for the divisions they make between a merely contentious ‘anti’ politics and the radical ‘alter’ of the political. In the case of universities like McGill, the former is often nonphysical, and participation and dissent are

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occupation. To be spatially conscious when talking about university occupations means recognizing that what stays with us about those experiences, one year later, is not always reducible to ideological talking points or to victories and defeats at the level of politics. In this way, physical space becomes very much an object of anthropological concern. If Ticktin’s ‘political’ involves challenging the very parameters of contention

express dissent through the avenues the university has established for this purpose. The prescribed channels for communication – for democratic participation in life at the university – are ignored or ineffective, and the only response is to occupy, to ‘take up space’. Occupations and similar forms of protest, as physical manifestations of bodies into the spaces of the university, rewrite the parameters of those spaces and allow us to

relegated almost exclusively to the level of discourse and to virtual spaces. Understanding the limits this immateriality imposes on political existence at the university becomes key to listening to the way occupiers frame their actions: as the McGill occupiers’ statements show, it is through physical, material protest that they feel pressed to intervene against the failures of a largely immaterial machinery. Butler and Soja help us understand

occupation as both spatial and bodily practice, not just the declaration of an oppositional position. When bodies gather together in

and claim space, publicly and collectively, they *open up* political possibilities for the future at the same time as oppose the politics of the

present. 

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- There's a temptation here not only to equate the non-physical-/spatial with powerlessness and inefficacy, but also to establish a causal relationship between the two. Taken to its extreme, it becomes easy to argue that there can be no real democratic political participation without physical presence – a reductive conclusion that fails to consider who can and cannot 'take to the streets', where the levels of risk are differentially allocated based on gender, ability, sexuality, status, and where the levels of risk are differentially allocated based on factors like gender, ability, sexuality, status, and care responsibilities. My intention here is not to argue that occupation is the only possible response in situations like the one at McGill. Rather, the context in which these two occupations occurred – as well as the context for many occupations globally – is one in which people on all sides are grappling with these questions of physicality and the political. Anthropology, for its part, seems well-poised to take up these questions.
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