Occupy Needs a Methodology: Review of Michael Gould-Wartofsky's "The Occupiers"

written by Riad Azar | August 31, 2015

Review of Michael Gould-Wartofsky, *The Occupiers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Occupy was the largest political mobilization of my lifetime. The explosion of energy it produced gave the feeling of perpetuity, with thousands of volunteers supporting each other through donations of food and standing together in solidarity against the police. But as the encampments became rooted, many had to check their excitement with a growing sense of disillusionment. It was clear that the Occupy strategy, and how it played out in practice, was rife with weaknesses that were ultimately exploited by those who sought to destroy Occupy and the discourse that it created.

The Occupiers: The making of the 99 percent movement is a post-Occupy analysis of the movement from an on-the-ground first-person perspective. The author, Michael A. Gould-Watofsky, is a doctoral candidate in Sociology at New York University, studying social movements. While the text presents many facts to help us analyze Occupy, Gould-Wartofsky's findings rest on a contradictory methodology that is characteristic of sloppy social science.

Gould-Wartofsky sets out to answer a series of questions by dissecting Occupy from the inside-out, beginning his inquiry with the historical root of the occupy strategy. Birthed from the devastation of the global financial crisis and nurtured in an Internet age that allowed for the easy reproduction of memes, the occupation of Zuccotti Park stood on the shoulders of the occupations that came before it in Egypt, Spain, and Wisconsin. Taking Zuccotti as his case, Gould-Wartofsky's questions ask what sorts of politics were birthed inside the occupied squares, and how those political ideologies operated in practice. The final chapters aim to explore the relationships that the Occupiers had nurtured (or neglected) with activist institutions at-large on the local, national, and international levels. (5)

The methodology chosen to answer these questions is ethnography. Gould-Wartofsky's self advertised strength is his proximity to the subject, as he “joined the occupiers in Liberty Square…listening to their stories, observing their everyday practices, and occupying…as an embedded researcher, ethnographer, and photographer.” (3) His methods are two-fold, one year of participant observation, and another year (post-Occupy) of collecting semi-structured interviews with various occupiers in New York City and around the world.

On the micro-level, Gould-Wartofsky's research does a fine job in presenting us with a first person account of the issues of Occupy. Considering the threats to validity that stem from full immersion, I was impressed by his critical stance towards the occupation. The text lays out a dense web of facts about the occupation of Zuccotti Park and how it was run—dispelling rumors that were untrue while adding to the arsenal of critiques of all ideological persuasions. Countering the myth of supposed leaderlessness within the encampments, Gould-Wartofsky demonstrates how occupiers who held significant social capital in the form of membership in various unaccountable decision making bodies, free time, and/or an attractive 'radical' politics, were able to influence the horizontal

democratic process and assert their power by creating a de facto ruling class. In describing the discontents of the occupiers' political ideology, Gould-Wartofsky notes,

> “Other forms of coordination emerged from behind closed doors, where ad hoc 'affinity groups' met in secret to 'make things happen.' The most influential of them met regularly in a private apartment on the Lower East Side. Its membership was made up of some of the most socially networked occupiers and the most politically skilled organizers.” (123)

This gap between theory and practice on behalf of the occupiers made up a worldview that would effect their efforts to organize cohesively.

The schism within the occupiers ran deep. Detailing how political ideologies operated within the square, Gould-Wartofsky categorizes the competing groups as the 'Ninjas' who “were avowedly anarchist and anti-capitalist, opposed to the making of demands, and oriented toward the reoccupation of urban space,” (166) and the 'Recidivists', supporters of “a more pragmatist, populist politics, centered on coalition-building and community organizing for political and economic reform.” (166) It was this trend that brewed beneath the surface of the occupation's relationships with civil society groups and unions, allowing the struggle for resources within Zuccotti to influence the decisions of how Occupy would relate to other institutional actors. Unable to present a clear message, their alliance with organized labor would ultimately crumble, as portrayed by Gould-Wartofsky in the attempt by West Coast occupiers to shut down Pacific Coast ports with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), “the occupiers…had neglected to consult the very unions on whose behalf they claimed to be speaking.” (179) The discussion sheds light on the politics or, perhaps more accurately, anti-politics, of autonomy. This is most clearly stated by Boots Riley, a hip-hop artist interviewed by Gould-Wartofsky, who stated, “[autonomous actors] didn't like the idea of a mass movement in the first place. Their idea of a mass movement is a lot of people that agree with them.” (179)

It is obvious that the Occupy encampments were congested with contentions: problems of political ideology, issues of operation and praxis, and a competition for resources that engendered a naive strategy. The facts that Gould-Wartofsky presents tell this story; the elephant in the room is the role of social science in radical politics, a role that I contend is not one of simply gathering facts but rather a role that influences what one chooses to do with the facts. What kinds of trends, findings, and observations can be derived from the facts, and how can they be organized in a way that leads to a richer understanding of social phenomena? Otherwise, there is nothing that separates a well researched work of political journalism from the insight into social life that we entrust to social scientists. It is a critical reflection on methodology, and what sorts of evidence one hopes to generate from their choice of methods, that divides the two mutually beneficial yet distinct genres.

One of Gould-Wartofsky's methodological failings is that he does not discuss whether or not he has any intention of establishing a scope to his research, or if he believes that his findings could be extrapolated to a larger social structure. In other words, does one write about Occupy strictly from the perspective of what happened inside the encampments, or do the actions and activities of the encampments open up a window into a deeper insight of the operation of social movements in the 21st century? If not, then my critique is an ontological one—I believe there is a reality that exists outside of the subject being studied that can influence the subject and ethnography is a tool to study how the subject encapsulates the norms, cognitive patterns, language, and beliefs of that wider reality. If yes, then there are serious questions as to whether he has been able to extend his scope outward enough to encompass the roots of the movement and structural and causal mechanisms that have influenced it.

So how does Gould-Wartofsky feel about method? To justify his use of participant

observation, and to explain his methodological choice, he cites three works which contradict each other. The first, *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis* edited by Marxist sociologist and ethnographer Michael Burawoy, is a collection of participant observation studies from a graduate course that Burawoy taught on the topic. The introduction and final chapter of the text are crucial insights into a methodological debate regarding not only Burawoy's own 'extended case method' approach, but also how Burawoy differentiates his approach from others.

"The extended case method…seeks to uncover the macro foundations of a microsociology. It takes the social situation as the point of empirical examination and works with given general concepts and laws about states, economies, legal orders, and the like to understand how those micro situations are shaped by wider structures." (282)

In other words, while Zuccotti Park is the area where Gould-Wartofsky has conducted his participant observation, the purpose of the method is to reveal the influences on how and why people act the way they do in that particular context by zooming out and observing the role of social, historical, and political forces.

The next citation is a collection edited by Jeffrey Juris and Alex Khasnabish titled *Insurgent Encounters: Transnational Activism, Ethnography, and the Political*. The introduction, co-written by the editors, states, "this approach to transnational social movements does not search for universal laws or test already formulated theories. Rather it generates new concepts and analyses in the process of ethnographic engagement." (9) This is essentially a summary of grounded theory, an inductivist method within participant observation which seeks to take empirical data as the point of departure and construct theory from that data rather than begin a study with a research question and a hypothesis. It is the methodological stance that Burawoy places on the opposite end of the spectrum from his own extended case method. Gould-Wartofsky engages with some aspects of grounded theory as when, for example, he poses a series of working hypotheses that he generates after his immersion into Zuccotti rather than frameworks that he used to think about the issues a priori. (44) However, it is precisely Gould-Wartofsky's framing through research questions that might cause controversy among grounded theory supporters.

Lastly, Gould-Wartofsky cites a working paper on a digital forum co-hosted by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), by Manissa McCleave Maharawal and Zoltan Glück, which argues that the participatory nature of Occupy requires ethnographers who are studying it to fully immerse themselves. "Because of the structure and process of Occupy, ethnography becomes a practice through which the researcher is inscribed in the movement." It argues that Occupy, as a political body, requires the participation of all in attendance due to its consensus model, therefore the researcher is required to participate if they are to have an accurate look into the everyday life of the encampments. This paper argues for the dissolution of the distinction between participant and observer, holding the extreme position on the spectrum between full participant and complete observer. This seems at odds with Burawoy who states, in the introduction of *Ethnography Unbound,* that participant observation should not be reduced to postmodern concerns of textual analysis, what he likens to literary criticism. "Here scientific theories are exposed as simply another world view, this time that of the observer, in no way superior to the world view of the participant." (3)

Gould-Wartofsky uses a model of full participation; he states that he was an activist before Occupy and therefore he was already connected with the lead organizers before the event. This has, arguably, given him unprecedented access into the occupations, and allows for a considerable amount of rapport with gatekeepers. The issue not discussed by Gould-Wartofsky or the authors of the SSRC working paper, is that the structural mechanisms of consensus operate both ways; on the one hand consensus forces all participants (and participant-observers) to become engaged with the decision-making process, while on the other hand it disallows the neutrality necessary to counter

bias. This is a consequence of the political problems associated with consensus—minorities are not able to make a reasoned dissent and both sides must compromise on their own principles. While it's impossible to be both a full participant and a detached observer, a discussion on the merits between the two are crucial for ethnographic reflexivity.

It's clear that Gould-Wartofsky is picking and choosing from an assortment of qualitative and ethnographic methods to develop a toolbox, which in theory is perfectly acceptable. A mixed method approach that is crafted in the debate between epistemological and ontological viewpoints is always useful in order to be creative with the ways that a researcher seeks to encounter and understand social phenomenon, instead of being a slave to a partisan methodological viewpoint. He generalizes between occupations when interviewing actors from different encampments, in the tradition of the extended case method, but does not observe how super-structural causes could have affected Occupy. He generates concepts from empirical data, ethnographic immersion, and participant observation, in the tradition of grounded theory, but also poses research questions a priori. He is a full participant in Occupy, in the tradition of total immersion, but does not reflect on bias.

In blending methods, what must be clear from the onset is what the researcher is doing, what are the pros and cons of the method, and a reflection and critical engagement with why the researcher chose the method they did. Otherwise, it is unclear as to whether Gould-Wartoksky imagines himself to be a social scientist on the ground writing journalism, or if this is supposed to be a work of social science.

Ethnography is a methodology of spectra. Focusing on the researcher's distance, on one end is the full participation in the phenomenon, and on the other a total detachment. Each node on the spectrum requires a discussion on bias and validity; every position will carry its own strengths and weaknesses. And it is this very discussion that is completely lacking from *The Occupiers* — the term 'valid' does not appear once, while 'bias' appears twice, but never about Gould-Wartofsky's own research bias: first in relation to the bias that Gould-Wartofsky seeks to correct from previous studies (12), and second referring to the counteraction of racial bias within the encampment. (99)

Without a clear take on how Gould-Wartofsky feels about the role of a participant observer and the context in which to study Occupy, we are left with an unclear analysis. There is no way to discern how Gould-Wartofsky seeks to posit and discuss occupy in relation to historical, political, and social influences. Whether a researcher chooses full participation or none, to generalize outward or to focus on particulars, to seek causation in the macro or interpret from the micro is a question of technique. What holds them all in common within a methodology is the critical thought that a researcher must engage in with her methods in order to come to the conclusions she comes to. To trace the root of an analysis, the reader must be able to discern what kind of a lens the ethnographer is working through. This requires a conversation that this text lacks.

It is this conversation that Occupy also seemed to lack. After the coordinated crackdown by national and local government actors on Occupy encampments across the country, the occupiers dispersed and dozens of side projects were born in its wake. But their resistance to engaging in debates around the merits of competing political methods continued, often undermining them when they tried to assist the communities most affected by the financial crisis. Gould-Wartofsky, in a concluding chapter dedicated to tracing the activities of the occupiers post-mortem, describes a group of occupiers who allied themselves with housing activists in East New York to take back foreclosed homes by occupying them. With the best of intentions, the action ultimately devolved into chaos when the occupiers lost “control of the space itself to a growing population of squatters, many of them homeless exiles from Zuccotti Park who had come to replace the Glasgow-Carrasquillos in the occupied house.” (174) It is in these moments that I see a similarity between Occupy's inability to engage in a discussion on the political methods they chose and their repercussions, and *The*

Occupiers lack of a critical methodological appendix. Both seem to lack discipline because they mistakenly believe that being precise equates to being authoritarian, and that holding the privileged position of researcher is a form of power so brutal that it is equivalent to the power held by capital and the neoliberal state.

As Max Weber noted in his essays on methodology, “there is no absolutely 'objective' scientific analysis of culture…of 'social phenomena' independent of special and 'one-sided' viewpoints according to which…they are selected, analysed and organised for expository purposes.” Ethnographic methodology, and the rigor that has characterized ethnographers in discerning that methodology and toolbox, exists for the purpose of understanding how participant-observers, ethnographers, and qualitative researchers come to the conclusions they come to and what influences their interpretive lenses. With this knowledge, the reader is able to make a judgement on where the research fits in the collection of viewpoints that Weber describes. Without this rigor, without clarity, without an engagement in the debate of ‘who I am, why and how I am doing what I am doing, how I am interpreting what I am seeing and how I am entering into a space that I perhaps may not even understand’, anyone can write anything they want and mask it behind the title of social science.

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