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Occupy Precarity

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Judith Butler has theorized “precarity” as a fundamental condition of life and applied it to Occupy Wall Street. In this essay, I underscore the political significance Butler attaches to precarity in uniting diverse individuals experiencing the subjectivation associated with what Michel Foucault calls “neoliberal governmentality,” where people come to be identified as failing to successfully rely on their human capital in a market-centered society. I argue that precarity is not just a philosophical abstraction but an actually existing discursive practice operant in movement politics in recent years and serving as what Michael Shapiro calls an “action framework” constitutive of the people being represented by Occupy. I suggest that Occupy’s representation of precarity enacted via street theater performs a politics of spectacle consistent with the role of protest movements in the broader political process. We can see this once we integrate Butler’s work with the insights of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward.

The mass protests associated with the Occupy movement that began on September 17, 2011, in Zuccotti Park near Wall Street were inspired in part by the protests of the Arab Spring and the European revolts against manufactured austerity. This massive upsurge in political protest has included a diversity of participants coming together to express their outrage at leaders of an ongoing economic transformation who continue to profit while the protestors and those others they represent experience growing economic marginalization in different ways. Judith Butler’s Mary Flexner lectures at Bryn Mawr College in December 2011 build on prior work to provide a critical perspective for theorizing the shape that the protests took, especially regarding how diverse groups of people can come together to act in concerted fashion.¹ Her approach points toward a coalitional politics grounded on diverse people’s shared “precarity” given their economic marginality. Butler’s focus on precarity enables us to highlight the importance of how people are subjectified in diverse ways that make it difficult to secure a stable place in any number of social fields.² This process of subjectivation in the current period has been insightfully anticipated by Michel Foucault’s notion of “neoliberal governmentality,” where people are enlisted to take up positions as self-disciplining citizen/subjects who can be responsible for using market logic for making personal choices in the name of enhancing their human capital.³ In other words, we could say that those at risk of marginalization, as deficient neoliberal citizen/subjects, have come together as the diversely socially and economically dispossessed to act in concert as “the people” seeking redress for the marginalization and deprivation they endure under neoliberalism.⁴

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Butler argued that precarity is a fundamental condition of life for all regardless of their differences.⁵ More recently, she applied this perspective to analyze Occupy demonstrators as “bodies in alliance” against a common economic precarity.⁶ Butler’s theorizing of precarity has been characterized as an ethical turn away from political contestation toward a “mortalist humanism” that appeals to an ethical consensual concern for people’s shared condition.⁷ Yet, Butler’s turn to precarity in the case of Occupy is itself a profoundly political move enacted by movement actors themselves to bring together diverse groups uniting them around their shared economic marginalization. Precarity brings diverse bodies into alliance, if tenuously and contingently, in the name of representing a shared condition that needs to be challenged and contested in conflict with the powers that be. The representational performances of Occupy’s public protests enact a politics of resistance, a politics of dissensus, central to political movements in general.⁸

“Precarity” as a unifying, as opposed to depoliticizing, force gains further traction when we consider the “Precariat” as a new class. Guy Standing in fact has suggested that ongoing transformation of the economic system has given rise to a new social formation—the “Precariat” that can be counter-posed to Marx’s Proletariat.⁹ For Standing, the Precariat is a diverse group, occupying different positions in the class structure, from the poor and working class, to the downwardly mobile middle class displaced from decent paying blue collar manufacturing jobs and white and pink collar office work, to the better paid but now increasingly vulnerable, professional class. The diversity of the Precariat heightens our concern about how to practice a coalitional politics in the name of the differentially

positioned, so to integrate the newly dispossessed with those who have been for a long time systematically marginalized, middle class professionals with the poor, whites with blacks, young with old, homeowners with the homeless, that is to say, how to ally those who share little but their increasing precarity in the current era. These challenges for Occupy resonate with the persistent political tensions in movements more generally: (1) how do they bring diverse people together to engage in collective action; and (2) how does a movement fit into the broader political landscape?

In this essay, I suggest that Butler's perspective sheds important light on the conditions for effective collective political action today. I use Butler's focus on Occupy as "bodies in alliance" to underscore how it involves diverse individuals experiencing the subjectivation associated with neoliberal governmentality, where people come to be identified as failing to rely successfully on their human capital in a market-centered society. "Precarity" turns this subjection back on itself and thereby provides a basis for realizing the collective political agency of a diverse population which has been marginalized economically in different ways.¹⁰ Much like the use of the word "homeless" to reference a shared lack among a diverse population, "precarity" takes a position of marginality differentially experienced and uses it to highlight a shared condition for political effect.¹¹ Through public demonstrations, the participants of Occupy come to dramatize their shared condition by turning their shared subjection as deficient neoliberal subjects back at the state.

In what follows, I argue that "precarity" is not just a philosophical abstraction but is an actually existing discursive practice operant in movement politics in recent years. Precarity turns out to have been relied on in European protests for some time providing a basis for political mobilization.¹² "Precarity" is what Michael Shapiro calls an "action framework" constitutive of political action itself and not just a reflection of it.¹³ Butler's turn to precarity therefore has direct relevance for understanding the challenges of Occupy and the nature of movement politics more generally. I suggest that Butler's focus on precarity highlights how people's shared vulnerability becomes a basis for achieving political agency by way of public performances that serve to represent the common interests of those being variously marginalized by ongoing economic change.¹⁴ I argue that this sort of politics of spectacle enacted via forms of street theater performs important work consistent with the role of protest movements in the broader political process. I conclude by suggesting that we can see this more clearly once we integrate Butler's theorizing with the work of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, so as to understand the political significance of Occupy as a protest movement to the political system overall.

Collectivizing Individual Grievances

Occupy confronted challenges in enacting effective representation of its diversity, including the diverse forms of economic precarity among its participants---students with debt, homeowners with debt, homeless people without a home of any kind, the unemployed professionals cast aside by either Wall Street or Main Street, and the growing number of unemployable made disposable by a neoliberalizing economy that expects people to trade on their human capital only to see a widening gap between haves and have-nots. Occupy encampments themselves varied, taking different forms in downtowns, city parks, college campuses and involving different groups with different concerns. Diversity among participants in any one site had the potential to be both a source of strength and tension.¹⁵

For Butler, Occupy represents most strikingly a public venue and political space for diverse people articulating their connections via their shared precarity. Occupy enacts for Butler a representational politics when diverse people come together, appear publicly together and form "bodies in alliance."¹⁶ In particular, Butler sees the space of appearance as constitutive of appearing as such, where the background enables the foreground, where the public venue allows persons to be identified as bodies in alliance.¹⁷ Butler states: "Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us or, indeed, among us. So this is not a matter of finding the human dignity within each person, but rather of understanding the human as a relational and social being, one whose action depends upon equality and articulates the principle of equality....The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together or, rather, when, through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being."¹⁸

Diverse peoples unite as a people, as bodies in alliance, when representing in public a shared concern or condition. In her account of Occupy, Butler considers not only precarity as a shared condition for bodies to act in alliance, but also how bodies in alliance enact their political agency collectively. Her concern is with the very precarity of precarity, how precarity is a tenuous, if important, basis for acting in concert. Butler appreciates the tensions between the individual grievance and the collective action, and she seeks to create ways that enable those tensions to stay in the foreground. Thus she attends to the ways that the private body in all its diversity that makes public action

possible becomes a difference that gets neglected when we act in concert. As a result, she remains concerned with how collective action can do an injustice to individual concerns.¹⁹

For Butler, then, a key issue for Occupy is how difference and identity get imbricated in a politics of collective action.²⁰ She has suggested with John Muse that we can see this imbrication in the Occupiers' use of images, narratives and numbers and the ways they get articulated one to the other.²¹ One site for seeing this imbrication is the "We are the 99 percent" Tumblr website.²² Here, we see starkly in serial fashion the iterative imbrication of the relationship of personal narratives to impersonal numbers, where individuals talk of the different ways they have been personally made more precarious in the current era, even as they join together under impersonal statistic of the "We are the 99 percent."

Occupy like other protest movements includes within it at a fundamental level a process by which individuals coalesce merging individual concerns in the name of collective action. Its collectivizing has been effective. In less than a year, the Occupy Wall Street slogan, "We are the 99 percent," became a commonplace in political discourse, likely affecting how presidential candidates were evaluated. A good case can be made that the 99 percent slogan provided the interpretive context for the public airing of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's private comment to wealthy campaign donors that the "47 percent" of Americans who did not pay any taxes were voting for President Barack Obama out of sense of entitlement as victims that the government should take care of them.²³ Exit polls would subsequently show that Obama was overwhelmingly seen as more empathetic than Romney to the plight of ordinary people.²⁴

For Butler "We are the 99 percent" has proven to be more than a powerful slogan for a movement focused on a coalitional politics that brings together diverse people, bound only by their shared disdain for the state's failure to protect them and their individual and collective futures. In fact, it arguably was the critical discursive move for a movement wrought from a coalition of diverse actors. The Tumblr powerfully displays how diverse peoples can be united under this banner. It facilitates their coming together around their shared precarity. At the same time, it provides opportunity as well to demonstrate the widely diverse ways in which different people experience the negative effects of the global economic meltdown. It further diversifies our understanding of how precarity can be variously experienced so as to make very different people out to be deficient neoliberal citizen/subjects incapable of effectively trading on their human capital to succeed in an increasingly market-centered society. We are all different but we are all not the 1 percent who profit from our increased economic marginalization.

Butler recognizes that individuals coalescing around an idea (such as their shared precarity) is not the equivalent to mobilizing collectively for concerted political action. One way to address this distinction is to ask in what ways the actions of Occupiers constitute a form of agency. The Occupiers' agency is arguably something not of their own making, but in no small part structurally conditioned, producing participation in radical politics only by default. Many Occupy participants, new to movement politics, were radicalized because the failure of conventional avenues left them no other option. Their radicalization bespeaks a specific process of subjectivation in an era when they have been enlisted or solicited as subjects by virtue of their place in the economic derailment and political dysfunction of the present—a process that seems to hold out the possibility of transformation to a deeply divided society of haves and have-nots.²⁵ The Occupiers' claim to stand for "the 99 percent" suggests that they represent all of us who increasingly feel as though we are on the outside looking in on a changing society. "Occupy" itself represents the idea that people should collectively reclaim as public the spaces that have produced our exclusion.

The imbrication of the personal individual in the impersonal collective as represented in protest actions raises the question of agency, specifically whose? Is the agency of Occupiers found in their individual actions as conscious actors committed to change or in what they represent as a collective? These questions go to the heart of not just the issue of Occupy's future but to the study of political behavior in general. For instance, much of conventional, mainstream, contemporary political science assumes that individuals can choose how to act and that researchers should focus on individual choices; the quintessential case is the American voter, but study of rebellious behavior should be equally subject to this characterization.²⁶ This orientation is at odds with a more critical, often leftist perspective that highlights the importance of social structures in constraining people's choices. The distinction between these two approaches, however, has been overdrawn. Karl Marx himself famously did not wholly favor structure over agency. As he wrote in his polemic "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte":

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied

with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.²⁷

For Marx there is a dialectical tension between structure and agency that drives history forward; this insight was central to his philosophy of historical materialism and to its explanation of how social change, including revolutionary change, occurs. Agents of change carry the burden of history and act in response to its structural constraints but, within them, act to remake structural conditions that in turn shape how future agents subsequently produce further changes. People are not completely free to act, individually or collectively, but they are free to act in response to structured conditions in any one place and time.

From Marx's insight one might infer that Occupiers are merely acting out their frustrations in the face of their growing precarity wrought from systematic processes of marginalization. Or are there varying degrees of conscious political calculation that promise a more strategic approach?

The coalition of the systematically marginalized becomes a self-conscious movement challenging that system that is creating their shared precarity. The power of the "99 percent" slogan lies in no small part in its suggestion that, while we are the many who have suffered at the hands of the few, we are also a collective made up of individuals who can come together to solve our own problems when the state fails us. Perhaps it is only when the individual becomes part of the collective that political agency becomes manifest. Bodies must be in alliance before their political agency can be realized.

This centrality of the individual's relationship to the collective and vice versa has been made explicit in the Tumblr. It is particularly noteworthy that it includes images accompanied by a note stating "I am the 99 percent." "I am the 99 percent." Not "We"! The I/we inversion is to the word/image imbrication, serving in this case to humanize an impersonal statistic. The binaries of I/we, word/image, and narrative/number become reversible, so that we can slide back and forth as required to realize political agency. The Occupy movement is open for individuals to partake (divide and share) as needed for individual and collective effect. Movement builds by allowing participants to offer their unique stories in a common cause — a creative response suggesting that, even in our depersonalized and bureaucratized society, people find their place(s) and find their voice when they coalesce in collective action.

The collective becomes the site where individuals achieve agency via the relays between their personal stories and impersonal representations. It is also the site of the reverse—where the collective achieves agency via the uniting of diverse individuals acting and even performing as bodies in alliance. We see this imbrication of the personal and the impersonal in striking images of the European protests (see Figure 1, below).



Figure 1 –“I am a Profitable Person”: Telefonica Strikers, Barcelona, Spain, November, 2012
(AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti, Image Licence-00023391)

In speaking of the Russian punk rockers Pussy Riot who were imprisoned for their anti-state performances, Slavoj Žižek notes: “This is why they wear balaclavas: masks of de-individualization, of liberating anonymity. The message of their balaclavas is that it doesn't matter which of them got arrested – they're not individuals, they're an Idea. And this is why they are such a threat: it is easy to imprison individuals, but try to imprison an Idea!”²⁸ Similarly, the anonymous European protestors depicted in Figure 1 put aside their individual identities to act in concert anonymously in the name of a shared concern and a larger idea. So it is with “We are the 99 percent” protestors who take on the shared identity of an impersonal statistic.

Deconstructing the personal narrative/impersonal number imbrication raises further issues of what it takes for people's (individual) actions to constitute forms of (collective) agency. The agency of the balaclavas-wearing protestors ironically comes in their anonymity, where the process of de-individualization makes them a collective force that stands for an idea—in this case how they have all have been made precarious economically. They put aside their individual differences and stand for the Precariat's great refusal to go along with the economic transformation and its manufactured austerity. They become a living example of a class “for itself,” this time as a Precariat as opposed to the Proletariat.²⁹ They are Marx's “träger” as bearers or carriers of history, acquiring agency collectively by representing an idea.³⁰ It is this collective agency that enables the marginalized to be recognized as such.³¹ Stressing their universally shared precarity in this way is not de-politicizing but instead emphasizes that those left behind in different ways by economic dislocation deserve to have their grievances heard and addressed.³²

The relays between texts and images, numbers and narratives, highlight the processes by which collective action can potentially address individual claims without doing an injustice to them. Coalitional politics arguably has not just its own ethics, but a distinctive aesthetic as well (both of which can serve political purposes as part of a representational process). In fact, Jodi Dean suggests that the spectacle of the Occupy movement is more than street theater. For Dean, there is a politics of representation at the heart of Occupy. Dean writes:

Those who construe Occupy as post- and anti-representation misread plurality as the negative limit to representation when they should instead recognize plurality as representation's positive condition. Occupy Wall Street is not actually the movement of 99 percent of the population of the United States (or the world) against the top 1 percent. It is a movement mobilizing itself around an occupied Wall Street in the name of the 99 percent. Asserting a division in relation to the fundamental antagonism Occupy makes appear, it represents the wrong of the gap between the rich and the rest of us. Critics of representation miss the way Occupy reinvents the politics of representation because their image of representation remains deeply tied to parliamentarianism. It's true that Occupy eschews mainstream electoral politics. It is also true that Occupy rejects the nested hierarchies that conventionally organize political associations. But neither of these facts eliminates representation. Rather, they point to a rejection of the current political and economic system because of its failure to represent adequately the people's will, a will that is itself divided and can only be represented divisively.³³

Dean's argument about the representational politics of Occupy is consistent with Butler's focus on bodies in alliance coalescing around their shared precarity and enacted via a performative politics that generates political agency. Butler sees the performative dimensions of speech acts realizing agency when they involve a citationality where discursive practices get unmoored from originating contexts and get re-presented in ways that break with convention.³⁴ The transgressive, subversive and disruptive politics of Occupy street demonstrations in the name of the "99 percent" involve not just re-calculating who are the people in all their precarity; these are also performatives in service of a representational politics highlighting a shared condition not as an ethical argument as much as creating the basis for political action that merits meaningful responses.

In this way, Occupy's representational politics becomes a site for occupying people's subjection as deficient neoliberal citizen/subjects who have failed to trade efficaciously on their human capital enough to succeed in a market-centered society.³⁵ Rather than accepting their precarity, people adopt this status as a source of their collective agency. They occupy precarity! They spit back their marginalization in the face of those who have marginalized them. By embracing their shared precarity, Occupy becomes a way of realizing a re-politicized subjectivity as the Precariat acting for itself, representing the people as the "99 percent" and forging a collective force that needs to be recognized as a distinct political body. Much like the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* where the King's body is composed of the bodies of his subjects, the subjectivity of the "99 percent" gets realized when diverse bodies in alliance represent their shared precarity via the politics of spectacle in protest demonstrations.³⁶

Precarity: An Actually Existing Discursive Practice

We need to ask whether "precarity" is politically salient or just another academic conceit disconnected from political struggle, offering nothing of substance for those whose marginalization it characterizes. Is it another foreign term like "neoliberalism" that people in the United States are not prepared to use? Neoliberalism, however, with time has proven itself a useful term for describing the juggernaut that seeks to marketize everything, especially state operations, and, more troubling, social welfare programs.³⁷ And like neoliberalism, precarity points to something beyond marginalization in ways that underscore the growing uncertainties associated with the economic transformation currently underway. In fact, neoliberalism begets precarity, where the push to marketize everything makes people more vulnerable in that market volatility becomes a pervasive problem people must constantly confront. Increasingly, people are expected to absorb more of the shocks of market volatility in a neoliberal society where everything more and more operates according to market logic.³⁸

"Precarity" means more than income volatility. It adds to our ability to highlight a distinctive dimension of the transformation underway: how people are subjectified as citizens who must accept responsibility for handling the shocks of marketization.³⁹ "Responsibilization" is a term used to suggest this process whereby citizens are now to be expected to absorb more of the responsibility for handling the ups and downs of a more marketized society. Precarity is the fraught subjective condition that emerges out of responsabilization.

Yet, there is a lingering concern that "precarity" is a term of art used by theorists and not reflective of how the people being described understand their plight. The discursive violence of imposing an alien term on the Precariat is compounded when we consider that the term underscores vulnerability rather than the strength the Precariat seeks to exercise in resisting its systematic marginalization in the changing economy. Like "the homeless," "the Precariat," risks identifying a diverse population in terms of a lack, thereby re-inscribing vulnerability and occluding shared

strengths. The “strengths perspective” is often prized among social workers as a way of honoring the intelligence and abilities of clients rather than just seeing them as people with problems who cannot help themselves.⁴⁰ And just as “the homeless” masks a diversity of people with myriad conditions and challenges, so does “the Precariat” risk lumping many different people differentially at risk of suffering the shocks of marketization.

Yet “precarity” only mistakenly seems to be an academic conceit from the US perspective. The term comes from the frontlines of political struggle in Europe, more specifically, from the early protests over capital flight in the 1970s, that recurred with the intensified efforts to scale back social protections in 1980s, and then ultimately returned in the U.S. with the widening inequality between the have and the have-nots and then back in Europe in open defiance to the manufactured austerity that governments sought to impose after the Great Recession in the name of balancing budgets. As Andrew Robinson writes:

In addition to being a theoretical concept, precarity has been a focus for political organizing by social movements in Europe, such as Chainworkers, Intermittents du Spectacle and Precarias a la Deriva. These groups have organized a range of often attention-grabbing protests and actions, with their major mobilization being the Euromayday movement. In Italy, they have created their own patron saint, “San Precario,” whose icons turn up on protests.⁴¹

Franco Barchiesi traces precarity to the autonomist school in the 1970s, noting that the theorists learned from the activists what to call their condition. Barchiesi thoughtfully observes:

In his famous introduction to *Begriffsgeschichte* (or “history of concepts”), Reinhart Koselleck insists that concepts are not merely discursive constructs or static ideas but rather emanate and gain sense from political situations, social conditions, and historical trajectories. The conflicts that shape such processes modify the meanings of words and deploy new terms to depict specific realities, entities, and problems. The ways concepts enter public debates respond in fact to forces that contend the definition of political possibilities in the present by pointing at desired futures whereas “this activity of temporal semantic construal simultaneously establishes the historical force contained within a statement.” Modernity is for Koselleck therefore characterized by a use of concepts that does not merely systematize or describe an existing social order but historicize as change and “progress” the tensions between experiences and expectations so that “the moments of duration, change, and futurity contained in a concrete political situation are registered through their linguistic traces.”⁴²

So it turns out that “precarity” was there on the frontlines of resistance at the beginning of the long wave of economic change associated with neoliberalism in an age of globalization. It comes to us as an actually existing discursive practice used to highlight the tenuous positioning of citizens in the emerging neoliberal economic order. It is a concept of this moment in late modernity. It is not just a word for describing a contemporary condition; it is a politicized speech act constitutive of responses to the conditions—Michael Shapiro’s “action framework.”⁴³ Consistent with Marx’s Thesis XI, the point of “precarity” is not to understand the world as much as to change it. We must occupy precarity, using it not just to make sense of how the new economy is destabilizing and profoundly unjust, but also to achieve collective political agency in spite of how we are differentially affected by it.

From Wall Street to Main Street: Articulating Street Politics with Conventional Politics

Occupy protests represent in striking terms the challenges of pursuing Butler’s coalitional politics centered on highlighting the pervasive precarity associated with various subjectivities. There is a precarity to precarity; it has its own precariousness. The relays between texts and images, numbers and narratives, highlight the processes by which collective action can potentially address individual claims without doing an injustice to them. Nonetheless, the very fluidity and uncertainty of these articulations between individual and collective grievance is a source of concern for many who want the anarchic spectacle of the Occupy movement to be more than street theater that gestures in different ways without a sense of direction toward addressing common concerns.⁴⁴ Anticipating criticism from Butler and others who have emphasized the performative dimensions of Occupy, Dean writes: “In sum, the Occupy movement demonstrates why something like a party is needed insofar as a party is an explicit assertion of collectivity, a structure of accountability, an acknowledgment of differential capacities, and a vehicle for solidarity....Leftists are justifiably anxious with regard to the party—a desire for collectivity is not the only desire for which parties have provided a form.”⁴⁵ It seems then we have arrived at a Leninist moment where the question of deliberate action presses against the effort to give voice to persistent suffering. The grievances voiced by Occupy may continue to go unaddressed unless there arises an explicit agenda for action to redress those grievances. It is not just those who are dismissive of Occupy and what it represents who are insisting that it be more organized.

Yet the limitations of Occupy are actually its strengths. If we put Butler’s perspective in conversation with the best

thinking of political scientists, we can see that the issue is not understanding Occupy in isolation but articulating the relationships of the movement to the party. The real question is not choosing one or another form of protest politics but instead the relationship of protest politics to electoral politics. There is a longstanding debate on the relationship between protest politics and the conventional political process, including elections, interest group lobbying and public policymaking and implementation.⁴⁶ The issue recurs across a number of topic areas.⁴⁷ It arises as a critical focus when discussing political action by marginalized groups.⁴⁸

The specific issue of the relationship of protest politics to electoral politics has been perhaps best addressed by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward.⁴⁹ Piven and Cloward, scholars who were not shy about also being activists, serve as a critical resource for understanding what Occupy should be doing now.⁵⁰ For Piven and Cloward, there was an important division of labor between protest politics and conventional party/electoral politics. In fact, there was a dialectical relationship between them. Protest politics helped widen the discourse, highlighting grievances neglected by the electoral process, and elections provided the most effective way for the marginalized to influence the policy process once politicians saw that if they did not respond more disruptive actions would be likely.⁵¹

Piven sees Occupy as having effectively articulated a relationship to the electoral process. As the 2012 presidential election approached, she wrote:

[It is said that] electoral politics and movements proceed on separate tracks, and we have to choose one track or the other. This is a false dilemma. Elections and movements do not proceed on separate tracks.... Moreover, when protest movements do emerge, the price of appeasement can rise dramatically. Protest movements raise the sharp and divisive issues that vague rhetoric is intended to obscure and avoid, and the urgency and militancy of the movement—with its marches, rallies, strikes and sit-ins—breaks the monopoly on political communication otherwise held by politicians and the media.... Movements work against politicians because they galvanize and polarize voters and threaten to cleave the majorities and wealthy backers that politicians work to hold together. But that doesn't mean that movements are not involved with electoral politics. To the contrary, the great victories that have been won in the past were won precisely because politicians were driven to make choices in the form of policy concessions that would win back some voters, even at the cost of losing others.⁵²

Protest politics is not an alternative to electoral politics; instead they work synergistically.⁵³ It is a point often forgotten. Piven and Cloward were criticized when they moved from focusing their activist scholarship on the welfare rights movement to their successful drive to get the Motor Voter law enacted that required government agencies to register citizens to vote.⁵⁴ Yet, this kind of criticism fundamentally misunderstood the synergistic view of protest and electoral politics. Protests like Occupy with its slogan of “We are the 99 percent” can widen political discourse, open up electoral campaigns to consider submerged issues, pose the threat that elections will be affected if protestors concerns will not be taken seriously. At the same time, candidates who call for the public to be engaged, like President Barak Obama has, can encourage political activism beyond elections. As a result, protests can make electoral campaigns more robust and electoral campaigns can mobilize the people to make claims beyond voting for particular candidates. As the anniversary of Occupy approached, Piven wrote:

A movement forceful enough to change the course of history must accomplish two great tasks. [Beyond being disruptive, they are] communicative. The movement must use its distinctive repertoire of drama and disturbance, of crowds and marches and banners and chants, to raise the issues that are being papered over by normal politics, for the obvious reason that normal politics is inevitably dominated by money and propaganda.

On this, Occupy has already made substantial headway. The slogans that assert we are the 99 percent, they are the 1 percent, named the historic increase in inequality in the United States during the past few decades as the main issue, and the movement dramaturgy of encampments and masks and general assemblies and twinkling fingers helped to give the message heft and appeal, even to the media that had at first simply disparaged the movement. To be sure, there were lots of complaints that Occupy had failed to issue its own policy proposals – which I think it was wise not to, since to do so would have ensnared the activists in endless disputes about particulars. But that is quibbling. It is far more important that we can see the influence

of the movement's main issue – extreme inequality – on the speeches at the Democratic convention, for example....⁵⁵

The widening of political discourse wrought by Occupy's "We are the 99 percent" arguably was part of a winning formula that helped Obama get reelected by insisting that the wealthy had to pay their "fair share" to help fund government programs needed to assist people in a time of economic malaise.⁵⁶ From Butler's perspective, the transgressive, performative politics of Occupy is the source of its agency by allowing different people to articulate connections as bodies in alliance, without extinguishing their diversity while acting in concert. In this way, people's subjection becomes its own source of realizing a newly re-politicized subjectivity. For others, this is in fact the limitation of street politics more generally: it is a rudderless politics of spectacle. Yet, once we place Occupy and protest politics more generally in a broader context, as Piven and Cloward have done for us, we can see that there is a place and role for protest politics to be just that: protests that give voice to discontent. The dynamic relationship between protest politics and electoral politics allows protest politics to serve an important function in the overall political landscape. Their presenting people's shared precarity becomes a call that actors in the conventional political process can only ignore at their peril.

Conclusion

Integrating Judith Butler's philosophical arguments about Occupy as composed of diverse bodies in alliance contesting shared precarity with the empirical analyses of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward about the dynamic relationship between protest movements and elections strengthens both as forms of political inquiry that promise more effective political action. We come to better understand why Occupy does what it does and what it has to offer as part of the struggle for political change.

Neoliberalism begets precarity, and in multiple forms. We live in an age of precarity for the young as well as the old, the educated and the dropouts, the housed and the homeless.⁵⁷ A diversity of people are coalescing around their shared marginalization in the face of the changing economy that radically widens the gap between haves and have-nots. A coalition of the dispossessed has come to represent the people's shared precarity. As a movement, it has widened political discourse and beaten back criticisms against class warfare. A movement built from coalitions, its performativity makes for an openness that invites in a diversity of people, experiencing precarity in different ways and does so in a way that realizes their shared political agency. Its coalitional character allows for a revitalization that can sustain the protests, branching off to address specific issues. Its temporary status is not a weakness but a feature of its particular role in the dynamics of political change. It has already done much; it can do more. In the process, we see better not just why Occupy's coalitional politics makes sense given the challenges of activating diverse groups of people, we also see that a focus on giving voice to disparate concerns among the marginalized enables the movement to widen political discourse. People come together by re-politicizing their subjection as failed neoliberal citizen/subjects; their shared precarity becomes the basis for their becoming a new class—i.e., the Precariat. They make not a banal ethical appeal but spit back their subjection to the powers that be and achieve collective political agency in the process. As a result, Occupy performs important representational politics even as it resists offering an explicit public policy agenda. It ends up playing its part in the larger political process where those concerns get registered in elections, as we have seen, and in the public policymaking process, where it remains to be seen.

Notes

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¹ See Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," #*Occupy Los Angeles Reader*, 1-3 (November 2011): <http://suebellyank.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/ola-reader-full.pdf>.

² See Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, "Governmental, Political and Pedagogic Subjectivation: Foucault with Rancière," *Education Philosophy and Theory*, 42 (August 2010): 588-605.

³ See Andrew Dilts, "From 'Entrepreneur of the Self' to 'Care of the Self': Neo-liberal Governmentality and Foucault's Ethics," *Foucault Studies*, 12 (October 2011): 130-46. The quintessential strategy of neoliberal governmentality is "assets-building" where each person is expected to save, accumulate capital and build assets for long-term financial well-being. See Michael Sherraden, ed., *Inclusion in the American Dream: Assets, Poverty, and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For a poignant example of promoting the kind of subjectivation associated with neoliberal governmentality, see Bree Kessler, "Home Run: How Neoliberalism Took Over Home-Makeover Shows," *Bitch*, 57 (Winter 2012): 38-41.

⁴ On “the people” as manifested in Occupy, see Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012), Kindle Location 1005. Another notion of the people that highlights its internal diversity is “the multitude.” See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006).

⁶ See Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” <http://suebellyank.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/ola-reader-full.pdf>.

⁷ On how the appeal to a universally shared human vulnerability constitutes a de-politicizing “mortalist humanism” that prizes ethics over politics, see Bonnie Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism,” *New Literary History*, 41,1 (Winter 2010): 1-33. 10.1353/nlh.0.0140. Also see Glenn David Mackin, *The Politics of Social Welfare in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 130-34.

⁸ See Frances Fox Piven and Richard C. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: How They Succeed, Why They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

⁹ Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New and Dangerous Class* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2011). The upper tier of the Precariat could be seen as a new “New Class.” The “New Class” was a popular neo-conservative conceit in the 1980s to suggest that professionals were a new propertiless ruling class who had much more liberal political interests given that its income and wealth was not tied to owning private property but rather derived from their standing in the occupational structure as important experts. It seems the class system has come full circle and Standing stands this idea on its head with his Precariat which includes many professionals dislodged from upper-middle class status with the economic transformation underway. On the New Class, see B. Bruce-Briggs, *The New Class?* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1979).

¹⁰ On performativity as centered in the transgressive act of re-using a discursive practice outside its originating context, see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹¹ On the lumpiness of the “homeless” categorization, see Mark J. Stern, “The Emergence of the Homeless as a Public Problem,” *Social Service Review*, 58 (1984): 291-301.

¹² Andrew Robinson, “In Theory Precariatans of All Countries, Unite!” *Ceasefire*, March 18, 2011: <http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-precarity/>.

¹³ Michael J. Shapiro, “Introduction,” *Language and Politics*, Michael J. Shapiro, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 5.

¹⁴ On shared vulnerability as the basis for citizenship, see Martha Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency* (New York: The New Press, 2004).

¹⁵ See <http://www.theroot.com/multimedia/video-diversity-occupy-wall-street>. Also see Errin Haines, “Occupy Protesters Eye Diversity as Movement Grows,” *Huffington Post*, October 17, 2011; and Melanie Eversley, “Occupy Wall Street Shows Diversity in Age, Politics,” *USA Today*, November 1, 2011.

¹⁶ Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” <http://suebellyank.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/ola-reader-full.pdf>.

¹⁷ The relation of bodies in alliance to the space of appearance is analogous to music, where the spaces between the individual notes make the melody audible and comprehensible, where the silences between the sounds are constitutive of the song itself. See John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).

¹⁸ Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” *#Occupy Los Angeles Reader*, 1-3 (November 2011): <http://suebellyank.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/ola-reader-full.pdf>.

¹⁹ See Janell Watson, “Butler’s Biopolitics: Precarious Community,” *Theory & Event*, 15, 2 (2012): http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.brynmawr.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v015/15.2.watson.html#b9.

²⁰ On coalitional politics that emphasizes a shared marginal status in relation to power among diverse identity groups, see Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GQL: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 3 (May 1997): 437-65.

²¹ John Muse, “Preoccupations: Looking at Pictures with Judith Butler” (Public Presentation, Bryn Mawr College, November 9, 2011). Michel Foucault calls the text/image imbrication a “calligram.” See Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, Trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983 [1969]). The calligram highlights in particular how texts and images imply each other in the act of supplementation, where the audience interprets the text to imagine an image and vice versa. Also see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

²² <http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/>.

²³ Alfredo Quintana, “I Am the 99 Percent and the 47 Percent -- And Anything But the Romney-Percent.” *Huffington Post*, September 18, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alfredo-quintana/i-am-the-99-percent-and-t_b_1893916.html.

²⁴ Gary Langer, “A Draw on the Economy, a Win on Empathy – and the Face of a Changing Nation,” *ABC News*, 11/7/12: <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/11/a-draw-on-the-economy-a-win-on-empathy-and-the-face-of-a-changing-nation/>.

²⁵ See Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today’s Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

²⁶ See Sanford F. Schram, “The Artful Study of Not Being Governed: Better Political Science for a Better World,” *Common Knowledge*, 18, 2 (August 2012): 528-37.

²⁷ “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon” appeared in a nonrecurring publication titled *Die Revolution* in 1852 and was republished with the title *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (as Marx had originally intended) in 1869. This quotation is taken from the Progress Publishers edition (Moscow, 1937), translated by Saul K. Padover from the 1869 German edition.

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “The True Blasphemy,” http://jdeanicate.typepad.com/i_cite/zizek/.

²⁹ Edward Andrew, “Class in Itself and Class against Capital: Karl Marx and His Classifiers,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, 16, 3 (September 1983): 577-584.

³⁰ See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (Seattle: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), p. 2, preface, where he states: people are “the personification of economic categories, the bearers [Träger] of particular class-relations and interests.”

³¹ Alain Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon: Figures in Postwar Philosophy* (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 31, where Badiou attributes to Jean Paul Sartre the idea that: “Collective action is the pure moment of revolt. Everything else is an expression of man’s inevitable inhumanity, which is passivity.” Badiou himself, however, suggests that more than protest, the dispossessed need a party to channel their agency toward meaningful change.

³² For the argument that stressing precarity as a universally shared condition depoliticizes differences, see Honig, “Antigone’s Two Laws,” pp. 1-33. On how marginalization of some implies the inevitability of a politics of recuperation, see Bernard Williams’ use of the “moral remainder.” Bernard Williams, “Ethical Consistency,” in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp.166-186.

³³ Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, Locations 2043-2045.

³⁴ Karen Zivi, “Rights and the Politics of Performativity,” in *Judith Butler’s Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters*, Terrell Carver and Samuel Chambers, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 157-70. Also see Butler, *Excitable Speech*.

³⁵ See Dilts, “From ‘Entrepreneur of the Self’ to ‘Care of the Self’: Neo-liberal Governmentality and Foucault’s Ethics,” pp. 130-46.

³⁶ On the *Leviathan* frontispiece, see Ernst Kantorowicz, *The Kings Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

³⁷ See Sanford F. Schram, “Now Time for Neoliberalism: Resisting Plan B from Below,” In *Critical Issues for Social Work Practice*, Michael Lavalette and Iain Ferguson, eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Also see Wendy Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” *Theory & Event*, 7, 1 (2003): http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/theory_and_event/v007/7.1brown.html.

³⁸ Jacob Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift: The Assault on American Jobs, Families, Health Care, and Retirement--And How You Can Fight Back* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³⁹ See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

⁴⁰ Dennis Saleebey, “The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice: Extensions and Cautions,” *Social Work*, 41, 3 (1996): 296-305.

⁴¹ Robinson, “In Theory Precariatans of All Countries, Unite!”: <http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-precarity/>.

⁴² Franco Barchiesi, “Precarity as Capture: A Conceptual Reconstruction and Critique of the Worker-Slave Analogy,” *UniNomade*, October 10, 2012: <http://www.uninomade.org/precarity-as-capture/>.

⁴³ “Precarity” is what Michael Shapiro calls an “action framework” constitutive of political action itself and not just a reflection of it. See Shapiro, “Introduction,” *Language and Politics*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ See Michael Kazin, “Anarchism Now: Occupy Wall Street Revives an Ideology,” *The New Republic*, November 7,

2011, www.tnr.com/article/politics/97114/anarchy-occupy-wall-street-throwback.

⁴⁵ Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, Kindle Locations 2136-2144.

⁴⁶ A good review of the scholarship on the relationship of protest politics to conventional politics, see Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, "Ballots and Barricades: On the Reciprocal Relationship between Social Movements and Elections," *Perspectives on Politics*, 8, 2 (June 2010): 529-42. Not all scholarship has always appreciated the role of protest politics. One noteworthy example is the debate about the role of protest movements in influencing the New Deal. See Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, "Business Power and Social Policy: Employers and the Formation of the American Welfare State," *Politics & Society*, 30, 2 (2002): 277-325.

⁴⁷ The relationship of protest politics and more conventional politics for the civil rights movement is discussed in Katherine Tate, *From Protest to Politics: The New Black Voters in American Elections* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁴⁸ For just one important example, see Dara Z. Strolovitch, "Do Interest Groups Represent the Disadvantaged? Advocacy at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender," *Journal of Politics*, 68, 4 (2006): 893-908.

⁴⁹ See Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*; and Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Why Americans Don't Vote* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).

⁵⁰ See Sanford F. Schram, *Praxis for the Poor: Piven and Cloward and the Future of Social Science in Social Welfare* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), Chapter 3.

⁵¹ See Schram, *Praxis for the Poor*, Chapter 3. Piven's talk the Occupy Wall Street encampment in Zuccotti Park, on October 3, 2011, spoke to the role of the protest in distinction to the efforts of parties to win elections:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBbnnqIX9Jw>.

⁵² Frances Fox Piven, "Occupy! And Make Them Do It," *The Nation*, April 2, 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/article/166821/occupy-and-make-them-do-it>.

⁵³ On protest politics as something that is not done at a distance from the state, see Badiou as cited in Mackin, *The Politics of Social Welfare in America*, p. 203.

⁵⁴ See Schram, *Praxis for the Poor*, Chapter 3.

⁵⁵ Frances Fox Piven, "Occupy's Protest Is Not Over: It Has Barely Begun," *Guardian*, September 17, 2012.

⁵⁶ See Jeffrey C. Alexander, "The Arc of Civil Liberation: Obama-Tahrir-Occupy," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, forthcoming.

⁵⁷ See Standing, *The Precariat*.