Street Politics in the Age of Austerity

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Nez, Pascale, et al.
Street Politics in the Age of Austerity: From the Indignados to Occupy.
Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66548.

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The Occupy Movement in France

Why Protests Have Not Taken Off

Didier Chabanet and Arnaud Lacheret

Many observers were surprised that the Occupy Movement attracted very little support in France, while in other neighboring countries, notably Spain, street protests were huge and numerous. The cry of Stéphane Hessel – in his book Indignez-vous! (‘Time for outrage!’) – is said to have been a remarkable bestseller¹ but had hardly any knock-on effects. Although this observation is accurate, we feel the need to add several comments that mitigate its scope. First, the Occupy movement, as strong as it may be in certain regions of the world, is a phenomenon which remains globally limited. On the European scale, most countries have not witnessed any significant mobilization, as the Italian case shows (cf. Zamponi 2012). From this angle, France does not stand out as an exception and follows the general trend. The astonishment is based largely on the idea that France is traditionally a country with a high level of social and political contention. This belief seems to be borne out by statistical analysis, in any case over the period of 1990-1995, in which France was the European country that experienced the most protest events, far more than Germany or Spain (Nam 2007: 108). At the same time, this capacity for mobilization was not linear and often led to extremely intensive peaks, such as in the 1995 strikes in the public sector or the 2006 protest against the reform of the labor law (Contrat de première embauche, CPE) (Lindvall 2011). It is possible, therefore, that mobilization has undergone a momentary slump or is following a temporality of its own, without this prefiguring its future development. One may add that the density of civil society in France, especially its associative and trade union sectors (Béroud et al. 2008), is notably weak (Balme and Chabanet 2008: 48), which may partly explain the somewhat eruptive and unpredictable nature of social protest. Thus, the situation is at once complex and relatively paradoxical, combining a high level of social and political agitation with a decline in the structures which were for a long time the main channel of expression of popular discontent (Fillieule 1997).

In France, the first Occupy demonstrations took place at the end of May 2011, in the capital but also in the provinces, particularly in Lyon, Marseille,

1 With sales of almost two million copies in under a year.
Poitiers, Toulouse, and in several towns in the southwest of the country. In all, twenty or so towns were involved. Settlements were rare or of short duration, with the exception of Bayonne where they lasted for six weeks. The gatherings involved a few hundred people, except in Paris where two demonstrations brought together between 2,000 and 3,000 protestors. On 15 October 2011, the Occupy demonstrations organized simultaneously in several dozen countries made it possible to measure the level of mobilization on a world scale. In Paris and in France’s main provincial towns, no gathering of more than 3,000 people was recorded, while in several dozen towns abroad, processions of over 5,000 people were frequent. In Madrid (500,000), Barcelona (300,000), Rome (100,000), Valencia (50,000), Lisbon (80,000), Santiago de Chile (80,000), New York (40,000), Berlin (10,000), Frankfurt (10,000), Brussels (7,000), or even Toronto (5,000), the crowd was even much larger. Without being non-existent, the mobilization in France did not really take off. Thus, in the spring of 2012, several processions of a few dozen people coming from different provincial towns converged on the heart of the capital after marching through deprived inner districts of the Paris suburbs, able to gather only a few hundred demonstrators at its peak on 21 April 2012.

To understand the inability of Occupy to mobilize large numbers of people in France, we set out a series of reflections that relate to the social, political, and economic circumstances of the country. We begin by examining the effects of the political calendar, particularly in the specific context of the presidential election campaign of 2012. We then show that access to the labor market and the employment situation in general remain less catastrophic than in many European countries where the Occupy movement or the Indignados have grown. In France, the diploma continues to protect a large proportion of young people from the most aggravated forms of exclusion and precarity. But the relative protection of some is associated with a deterioration for others, especially in districts where the most marginalized populations are concentrated. One of the main failures of Occupy was precisely not having been able to rally to its cause those who, in the suburbs, were the most socially exposed. Unable to spread throughout French society and remaining isolated, the mobilization attempt was vulnerable and completely exposed to police repression. In the final section of the chapter, we seek to understand – on the basis of a survey carried out amongst participants of Occupy Lyon – why the latter did not succeed in arousing a broad mobilization impetus.
From a methodological standpoint, our approach is resolutely qualitative. Given that our study commenced after the end of the mobilization, in the fall of 2012, we initially tried to contact activists. Our research led us to identify a local radio host and trained sociologist who had organized several broadcasts with Occupy and had himself taken part sporadically in mobilizations. We questioned him at length at the outset, and he put us in touch with other militants, each of whom in turn provided us with one or several names. This snowball sampling strategy allowed us to carry out seven in-depth telephone interviews and one face-to-face conversation at the home of one Occupy participant, each interview lasting about an hour. We also watched several dozen hours of online broadcasts made by the local media (radio, TV) devoted to the Occupy movement in Lyon and which was an invaluable source of information. Lastly, we analyzed the ‘archives’ of Occupy in Lyon, made up of fifty or so typescript pages in a pouch. These archives are the only written traces of the movement on itself that we have been able to track down. They outline its internal organization, actions, programme, and political claims.

The Ballot Box Rather Than the Street?

The difficulty that Occupy experienced in attracting large numbers of people in France cannot be explained by the absence of grievances and discontent. Generally speaking, the French are particularly worried about their future, especially young people under the age of 25. In addition, French citizens are among the most critical towards globalization, capitalism, and the market (Cahuc and Carcillo 2012: 21-30).

The mobilization of Occupy must first be understood in the light of recent struggles, which resulted in scathing failures and which may have discouraged some potential militants. Thus, in France, the two most recent large protest movements – against the reform of universities in 2007 and against reform of the retirement system in 2010 – were marked by the intransigence of the government, which did not yield to demonstrators. It is possible that this intransigence prompted most of those who struggled against liberal globalization to withdraw, at least for the time being, to


4 Analysis of the situation in France since 2011 and testimonies by the activists themselves can be found at: http://paris.realledemocratie.net/taxonomy/term/186.
Diplomas, the ‘Open Sesame’ of the Labor Market

The political context correlates closely with the economic crisis that France is going through. Without playing down the importance of the problems being faced, the country has been relatively protected and has suffered a

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5 One of the main weaknesses of the POS argument is that, for some, a favorable POS enhanced mobilization and social movement development while for others, it was the reverse, like for the Indignados in France. For a discussion of the approach, see Fillieule and Mathieu 2009.
less severe crisis than many others, especially those in southern Europe (see chapter 2 in this volume). If poverty, social exclusion, and unemployment are on the increase in France, the situation is ‘less worse’ than in Spain, Portugal, or Greece. In 2011, the share of people at risk of poverty after social transfers was 14 per cent in France, 21.8 per cent in Spain, 18 per cent in Portugal, and 21.4 per cent in Greece (Eurostat 2012). The French welfare state is able to soften the adverse effects of social inequalities better than in most other countries. The French universalist system (Esping-Andersen 1990) fulfills its role of buffer and regulator of conflicts, which is the main function of social protection in periods of recession and mass unemployment (Piven and Cloward 1990). Applied to the whole population, the explanation can be convincing, but it is weaker with regard to those under the age of 25. Certainly, the youth unemployment level in France may be two times lower than in Spain or Greece, but it remains significantly higher than the French national average. Above all, the main social assistance provisions in force in France remain inaccessible – in fact if not by law – to youths under the age of 25 who are therefore particularly vulnerable socially (Chabanet and Guigni 2013).

But more than the level of unemployment as such, it is the structure of, and access to, the labor market that stand out. Although diplomas represent a kind of ‘open sesame’ against precarity and still guarantee that one will eventually be able to obtain stable employment, most recruitment of young people today takes the form of an insecure contract or one of limited duration (Conseil d'orientation pour l’emploi 2011). The French labor market operates according to a dichotomous rationale that protects the most educated wage earners at the expense of those who leave the education system early and are often untrained.

A survey carried out in 2010 amongst several thousand young people who completed their education in 2007 showed that 92 per cent of those holding a doctorate were employed, stable or otherwise, just as did 88 per cent of those who had graduated from an engineering or commerce institute, and 80 per cent of those with an undergraduate degree (bachelor). On the other hand, only 55 per cent of those with a college diploma and 48 per cent of young people leaving the school system without a diploma were employed (Cereq 2011). The capacity of the French labor market to absorb young qualified people, as opposed to Greece or Spain for example, would be one of the reasons for Occupy’s failure to mobilize large numbers of youths.

6 In December 2012, the unemployment rate of 15-24 year-olds in the active population exceeded 24 per cent, compared to 10 per cent for the total population (Insee 2012).
Because the rise in unemployment and the phenomenon of exclusion do not affect French youth as a whole to the same degree, the families of the French middle and upper classes have always, for good or ill, the feeling that their children will escape the worst. Despite the relative worsening of the economic crisis, the most socially sheltered classes, also often the most politically active, no doubt still cling to individual strategies, focusing for example on the academic achievement of their offspring.

The Fragmentation of Territories: When Indignation is Selective

“Youth is only a word” (Bourdieu 1978: 143-154). In relation to social vulnerability factors, its heterogeneity is indeed glaring. The inequalities that cut across it allow us to outline the sociological profile of Occupy and, hence, one of the characteristics of the French case. What is noticeable, in fact, is the inability of Occupy to open itself up to the most marginalized populations, who are moreover at the heart of the economic, social, and political domination that activists denounce.

Admist widespread indifference, riots are in fact growing in France, giving an almost banal status to events which were hitherto relatively exceptional and thereby demonstrating the irresolvable relegation of a segment of French youth, literally shunned by society (Lapeyronnie 2008). The anger and despair upon which these insurgencies thrive refer back to several issues that are at the center of Occupy’s discourse. In these “exile districts” (Dubet and Lapeyronnie 1992), the level of youth unemployment is often the same as for young Greeks or Spaniards. The issues of wealth distribution, access to jobs, dignity, respect one for another, or equality of opportunity which are emphasized by a multitude of civil society actors in deprived suburbs did not lead to any convergence with Occupy even though the latter hold fundamentally the same aspirations.

This fragmentation of French youth is not new. Already in 2006, demonstrations against the First Recruitment Contract (CPE)7 had revealed a split between, on the one hand, young people concerned about their future but generally educated and on the verge of entering the labor market and, on

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7 Restricted to those under 25 years of age, the measure involved establishing a period of ‘consolidation’ of two years during which the employer could sack his or her young employee without notice nor justification and with a payoff reduced to a pittance. The idea, promoted by the government and the French employers’ organization, involved de-regulating recruitment conditions for young people so as to encourage their entry into the labor market and thus, paradoxically, speed up their obtaining stable employment.
the other hand, a segment significantly more excluded. The first became heavily mobilized, while the second did not. The weakness of Occupy stems from the same phenomenon and reflects its isolation in the space of social movements (Mathieu 2012). The paradox is all the more remarkable that the phenomena of class downgrading and urban violence are much more present in France than in most other European countries, with the exception of Great Britain (Chabanet 2014). Increasingly, mobilizations play out in segmented areas, which mutually ignore each other. In Paris, Occupy initially mobilized downtown and took over the main public places, with few links or contacts with the suburban areas where social problems are often concentrated. This pattern is the consequence of a long process that began at the end of the 1970s and progressively saw the ‘urban question’ replace the ‘social question’ (Viard 1994). In this sense, the difficulties of Occupy in France cannot be simply attributed to an economy that is less affected by the crisis than that of other countries.

Between Isolation and Repression

A series of different but converging phenomena contributed to marginalize Occupy politically. From the outset, the mobilization was built out of a radical critique of representative democracy. Refusing in particular the principle of the delegation of power, the movement sought to exist by itself with neither leader nor spokesperson. Acting in this way may have reinforced Occupy detachment from a certain number of activists networks – trade unionists in particular – which in other countries were able to make the link between various forms of opposition to austerity policies implemented by governments (see chapter 9 in this volume). This isolation was accentuated by the fact that French political life traditionally reserves an overriding place to political parties and, to a lesser degree, to trade union organizations, that is to say to actors whose role is institutionally recognized, who operate internally according to relatively hierarchical rules, and who tend to monopolize the social and political debate (Mathieu 2012). Lastly, given the importance the presidential election has in French national political life, the bulk of the forces on the left – especially the Left Front, which includes the Left Party and the Communist Party – preferred to focus on the preparation of this decisive event rather than actively support diverse groups from Occupy, themselves very attached to their autonomy of action.

Struggling to mobilize, Occupy did not win over the press either. One can clearly see in this situation a consequence of the dynamic specific to the
French political field, largely built around a few predominant organizations. Whatever the reasons, the main French media, whether newspapers or television, have given wider coverage to Occupy demonstrations abroad than in France. Some could criticize the timidity of a journalistic environment traditionally suspected of indulgence with regard to the economic or political elites (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993) – accessories of the system that Occupy denounces. In any case, Occupy was the subject of residual and relatively critical coverage in the traditional media, while more alternative channels (independent media, local radios, social networks, etc.) gave them more coverage and were often favorable.

The low visibility of Occupy in France, both as a force for mobilization and as an issue in the public sphere, has consequences for the policing to which it is subject. We know that the conditions of interaction between the police and a protest movement are one of the constituent dimensions of the latter, more or less facilitating its existence and development (Della Porta and Fillièure 2004). In France, repression was all the more easy given that it passed – as the mobilization itself did – almost unnoticed. The very modest size of the Occupy marches as well as the weak interest shown by the mainstream media allowed the police, almost as numerous as the demonstrators themselves, to disperse the gatherings quite quickly and to prevent highly symbolic public places such as the Bastille in Paris from being occupied for any substantial period of time (Mille Babords 2011). Police repression can be a resource for a social movement when it is broadly visible and can then be the subject of public denunciation. In France, none of these two conditions were met, so much so that nearly everywhere across the territory, gatherings were almost systematically dispersed, some demonstrators arrested and prosecuted on the spot, making lengthy occupation of public places extremely difficult. No other civil society actor intervened in solidarity.

While in Spain, the daily magnitude of demonstrations led the police to tolerate the occupation of the Puerta del Sol square in Madrid for one month and half (from 15 May to the end of June 2011), in France this phenomenon never happened. The media coverage of France’s less visible mobilizations was far from homogeneous, but the way in which France Info – the main continuous information radio in the country – covered, on 21 May 2011, the evacuation of the Place de la Bastille in Paris clearly shows that, without open hostility, the principal French media insisted, more or less insidiously, on the weakness of the movement and its immaturity:

It was after 9 p.m. that the CRS [riot police] went into action, on the Place de la Bastille which this afternoon had the airs of the Puerta del Sol.
The demonstrators had set up tents, some hoping to spend the night on the spot, like the Madrid indignados. But the law enforcement services dismantled them, accompanied by boos from the crowd. A rapid evacuation, with tear gas, after a day spent dreaming of direct democracy and another world. This Sunday, the French ‘Occupy movement’, after ten days of confidential meetings, finally succeeded in bringing together a good thousand people.8

Even if it is based on protest of a moral nature whose political content remains somewhat broad and blurred, Occupy has in different countries formulated a number of issues which give it a relative specificity: employment and housing in Spain, austerity measures imposed by the Troika in Greece (see chapter 6 in this volume), the denunciation of the fall in purchasing power in Israel (see chapter 4 in this volume), or the banking system in the United States. In France, Occupy rapidly abandoned the Bastille to concentrate on the business district of La Défense, the Parisian symbol of financial capital, borrowing thereafter from Occupy Wall Street the slogan “We are the 99%”. At the same time, a link was forged with associations like Droit au logement (DAL, ‘Right to Housing’) or ATTAC, which thereafter took part in some Occupy demonstrations. But Occupy was not capable of getting back to concrete and clear-cut slogans having meaning in the public arena. This critical analysis was, moreover, made internally by Occupy activists themselves:

From the outset, the movement rejected parties and trade unions. But when the task of elaborating a platform of proposals came up, it was not able to do more than generalities and declarations of intent. [...] However efficient this self-organisation might be in its practices, it cannot conceal forever the absence of a clear and debatable political project.9

It is difficult to highlight a particular element that explains the inability of the Occupy movement to grow and develop in France. Rather, it is the combination of economic and political factors but also the fragmentation of French social movements that nipped the mobilization in the bud. In this context, two segments of the population, active in other countries, were

only very weakly engaged in France: on the one hand, young educated and graduates; on the other hand, youths facing social insecurity, especially in the suburbs, whose despair and resentment find little political expression. For different reasons that are beyond the scope of this chapter, these two segments of the French population did not take to the streets, leaving the issue of insecurity, unemployment, and rising inequality in the hands of institutional actors.

A Case Study: Occupy in Lyon

The genealogy of Occupy Lyon is very enlightening and can help us to make sense of its difficulties to develop.¹⁰ In Lyon, as in Paris or even Bayonne, the first steps were taken by young Spaniards, often students in training in France. It is they who, echoing the Spanish mobilization, were the first to gather in the spring of 2011 to discuss their desire to see the emergence of a similar movement in France. Even if the mobilization subsequently spread to other nationalities, it was born out of a feeling of international solidarity, which while evolving remained one of its main features. In Lyon, hardcore activists took part several times a week, sometimes almost continuously, in meetings and demonstrations. This group was made up of thirty or so people, often involved in humanitarian action such as defending the rights of refugees, immigrants, or Roms. Most of them were sensitive to ‘major causes’ such as protection of the environment, the struggle against world poverty, or support for the Palestinians. Overall, their profile doubtless did not allow them to fit in with the local militant network, a factor that often contributes to the success of a mobilization (Uitermark and Nicholls 2012).

From the outset, several elements stand out. On the one hand, this group was made up of people coming from different backgrounds whose unity was problematic and not built around a project and clearly identified objectives. For example, the mobilization was not established as a reaction to a government decision, which could have provided political cohesion. It was rather born out of the willingness to participate in an event which began to emerge abroad and which met a strong desire for change in the militants in Lyon. In the absence of a clear and unambiguous slogan, people from quite diverse walks of life found themselves a common ethic which led them to

¹⁰ The investigation was carried out after the mobilization phase. The remarks which follow are therefore the fruit of an a posteriori analysis, based mainly on processing information collected through interviews and on documents supplied by Occupy activists themselves.
refuse to tolerate “a world led by a caste of the rich” in which the interests of a very small number of the privileged override those of the vast majority. The values and expectations that these militants harbor undoubtedly have a strong political dimension, but they do not find their expression through traditional forms of participation. Thus their rhetoric did not make any reference to a particular party or trade union commitment. More broadly, for them, the right/left divide, which continues to dominate the bulk of institutional political life in France, appears almost devoid of any meaning.

The world such as it is today, it is the whole political class that has built it, or let it go unrestrained for ages. Frankly, why trust them? For me, they all failed. We are now faced with immense, gigantic problems which we are going to have to resolve on our own otherwise we will not make it. That is the Occupy movement. For me, it is also a way of saying in the face of all those in power ‘that’s enough! Stop the crap, it’s us the ordinary people, the citizens, who decide’.  

Among protestors, the specter of political opinions is extremely broad, ranging from the centre-right to social catholicism, anarchism, libertarianism, or the extreme-left – which in itself reflects a high level of heterogeneity – without any of these currents being really structuring. The influence of Trotskyist networks, often linked with youth movements, remained very limited. In the absence of strong support, the mobilization never exceeded more than a few thousand individuals, on an intermittent basis. With its weaknesses, it demonstrates the changes affecting contentious action today. The sociology of Occupy activists fits perfectly with what scholars have been arguing over the last twenty years concerning the renewal of contemporary militant practices (Ion 1997; Perrineau 1994). On average, Occupy is made up of a relatively educated public. Human sciences students are quite well-represented in these mobilizations, which may be explained both by this group’s tendency towards social criticism and a greater difficulty than students from other academic background in finding stable employment. On the whole, the activists we interviewed thought that the majority of participants in Occupy were under the age of 30 and often had unstable

11 Interview with Patrice, presenter at Radio Pluriel, occasional militant, and sympathetic to Occupy (8 January 2013).
12 Interview with Marie, project leader and community activist, highly committed in Occupy Lyon.
employment or little jobs. Cultivated without being politicized, they were both very open to the world, expressing ideas and strong convictions, but only rarely adhered to a militant organization. In the slogans and rhetoric, their discontent shows up in two versions: one takes the form of general disgruntlement faced with the injustices of the world and sticks to a logic of denunciation; the other goes a bit further and calls for “leaving the system”. The movement’s archives thus never raise the question of class struggle or social exploitation. Instead, they describe a form of organization gasping for breath, making of each individual a slave. The world is thus said to be at “a total dead end, simultaneously at the economic, financial and monetary, social, media, political, and demographic levels.”

Very quickly, it appeared obvious that we had one sole and same objective: that of changing a world that is not like us, because it does not care about our basic needs.
A world in crisis deserted by the future.
A world where our natural habitat is in great peril, putting even our survival in danger.
A world of false images where our creativity is perpetually corrupted and diverted.
A world where our daily life is encapsulated in advertising.
A world where the only links that bind us are marked by the seal of greed, of lust, of profit.
“Real democracy now’, like a call to wake up from the bad dream into which we have plunged.

For the Occupy activists, it is above all a question of “resisting” and putting human beings at the heart of all circumstances in life, to struggle against ambient dehumanization. The expected change will then be the result of the awareness amongst individuals, in other words the voluntarism of everyone.

Generally, Occupy is wary of classical forms of participation, which are considered inefficient, constraining, and/or corrupt. More or less explicitly, it aspires to a balance between individual opinions and the organizational requirements of a collective movement. The desire to not sacrifice the first to the second is a constant concern, which results in the importance given

13 Interview with Régis, teacher, activist in Occupy Lyon (8 March 2013).
14 Unsigned, undated archive entitled text read at the beginning of the AG of 9 June: ‘Our cry of hope’.
15 Ibid.
to everyone's opinion and in the search for consensus during meetings. Such an objective requires the total involvement of those who keep the movement going day after day and resulted sometimes in exhaustion tinged with discouragement when it became clear that the mobilization was not taking off. If Occupy demands no other affiliation than that of “citizen movements that rise up throughout the world”, it may be considered the successor of all the struggles which, in France as in most developed societies, call for the emancipation and free will of individuals or citizens, rejecting by the same token the traditional forms of commitment and representative democracy (Inglehart 1977): “We advocate democracy that is direct, participative, self-managed, and anti-hierarchical.”

In the spring and summer of 2011, older people, often better integrated in the labor market and coming mostly from the communist left, took part in organized demonstrations and contributed somewhat to get the movement out of its lethargy. Occupy tried hard to attract social categories more exposed to greater deprivation or class downgrading by contacting associations established in difficult districts, but to no avail. After a few months, having failed to reach a positive momentum, the mobilization of Occupy ultimately ran out. In Lyon, the demonstrations did not exceed a few hundred people except for a gathering of about 5,000 supporters that took place on 16 October 2011.

Finally, the group was weakened by internal tensions. A major split emerged between two tendencies. On one side were those who favored the occupation of public places, in particular campsites, and who openly drew inspiration from Occupy Wall Street. On the other side were those who concentrated even more on the construction of Internet exchange and communication networks, putting the accent on the dissemination of ideas and theoretical reflection. The first sometimes prided themselves on being ‘real’ militants on the grounds that they were more exposed and took more risks by facing up to the police, while the second expressed their satisfaction of contributing to the cognitive enhancement of the mobilization through the use of social networks. These two approaches moreover come within different timeframes (also present in the Spanish Indignados, see chapter 5 in this volume), some seeking to provoke through action a short-term response from public authorities so as to get the movement established

16 Undated and unsigned archives, entitled ‘Who manages the debt of our lives. Moods and analyses’.
17 Undated, unsigned archive entitled ‘A societal project?’
18 Until now the largest Occupy meeting in France.
in the public sphere and on the political agenda; the others regarding the battle of ideas as the most important, and engaging in discussions to make possible, in the long term, the emergence of a better and less unjust world.

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In France, Occupy’s inability to grow has multiple causes arising from economic (the impact of the crisis was less severe than in other countries and academically qualified youths have been broadly spared the most acute forms of unemployment and insecurity) and political factors (the prospects of the left coming to power and the existence of a bid from the extreme-left, which served to snuff out discontent). Other explanatory factors are more worrisome and point to growing fractures within French society. Autonomous and isolated at the same time, the mobilization was unable to prevail. Against this background, the case of Occupy Lyon suggests that this weakness is also explained in part by the sociological features of Occupy, which comprises a group at once heterogeneous and divided, lacking local roots.

Bibliography


