

## Visual Memes as Neutralizers of Political Dissent

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the role of visual memes as neutralizers of contested past and present narratives of occupation and dissent by focusing both on the memetic structure of Occupy as well as on the digital visual memes associated with this movement. It examines the emergence of the term “occupy” as a meme in and of itself – Occupy Wall Street spurred Occupy Chicago, Occupy Oakland and even Occupy Sesame Street and Occupy North Pole as well as the “We are the 99%” meme that has come to define Occupy. Through the trope of the meme, this paper further conceptualizes revolution as both return and rupture made possible by viral civil and political dissent. It argues that there is a notable distinction between physical participation in the Occupy Movement and virtual participation through the reworking of Occupy’s memes. Whereas the first modality serves as an active disruptor of the political normative imaginary, the second works in precisely the opposite fashion, in its reconstitution of a common-sense dominant image of the political.

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In today’s heavily image saturated world, political imaginaries of the structure and scope of the collective will are intimately tied to iconic images that shore up, reinforce, and make literal and legitimate political visions. For example, the photograph of the Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima pictured the triumph of the United States, while that of V-J Day in Times Square signaled the victorious end of World War II. Respectively, politics of resistance have summoned their own signature images in order to gain recognition and validation in the eyes of the broader public – the face of Che Guevara as well as the mask of Guy Fawkes, popularized through the fictional character of V from the 2005 film *V for Vendetta* have become staples of the visual language of dissent. Thus, in the contemporary moment, issues of political representation are constantly formed and in turn have been transformed by visual cultural representations. In focusing on the Occupy Movement in the context of the United States with its political claims and visual messages, I ask to what extent the adoption of the image and imaginary behind the “We are the 99%” meme has offered an alternative inclusive democratic paradigm. The viral connotation both of visual Internet memes and of political dissent prompts to a further exploration of the relationship between stability and mutation, openness and closeness in democratic politics.

The concept of meme, conceived as the cultural equivalent of the biological gene by Richard Dawkins, spread through culture like a virus, quickly and widely. Its viral power is in turn understood as a product of nature, rather than culture, or rather as threatening to subvert culture into a condition of nature. Firing up over night, and disappearing just as quickly, memes are often allowed to run their course and fade into oblivion, only to return again later on. They emerge at moments of contestation of dominant narratives and through their participatory structure of imitation and mutation, and they allow for the dissolution of points of ideological conflict as well as for the reestablishment of a normative narrative. If not too threatening to the health of the state body, these cultural viruses are left unchecked as they build immunity, and further, in Derrida’s terms, the “autoimmunity” of the nation-state. This paper explores the role of visual Internet memes as neutralizers of contested past and present narratives of occupation and dissent by focusing the digital visual memes associated with the

Occupy Movement in the United States. It examines the emergence of the term “occupy” as a visual Internet meme in and of itself – Occupy Wall Street spurred Occupy Chicago, Occupy Oakland and even Occupy Sesame Street and Occupy North Pole, as well as a marker of a revolution - revolving viral civil and political dissent. I argue that there is a notable distinction between physical participation in the Occupy Movement and virtual participation through the reworking of Occupy’s memes. Whereas the first modality serves as an active disruptor of the political normative imaginary, the second works in precisely the opposite fashion - in its reconstitution of a common-sense dominant image of the political.

## 1. Memes and Virality

The term “meme” was introduced by Richard Dawkins as the cultural equivalent of the biological gene. Dawkins defined memes as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*” (1999, 192), as a cultural idea that self-replicates like a virus and mutates while at the same time it preserves its core structure in order to survive. Memes, according to Dawkins are characterized by their fidelity, fecundity, and longevity. They must be open enough to change while still be able to preserve themselves. Online memes, as theorized by Michelle Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2007, 199), function as superficial analog memes as “contagious patterns of ‘cultural information’ that get passed from mind to mind and directly generate and shape the mindsets and significant forms of behavior and action of a social group”. In comparison to analog memes, they have a shorter shelf life, a more limited cultural influence, and they evince the characteristics of “replicability,” “remix,” and life (ibid., 209). Online memes thus spread faster, mutate more significantly, and remain active for a period of time, which is significant enough in the Internet context. Furthermore, the majority of memes which were studied by the authors had humor, rich intertextuality, and anomalous juxtaposition as their key components. Online memes, just like memes in general, are instances of viral ideas, which could spread contagious propositions with speed and efficiency. Furthermore the spread of ideas in both instances emerges through participation. Hence, memes appear to be democratic in their widespread use and mutation as they survive and grow through participation, while they remain structurally autocratic in their conservation of a key idea. This paper is interested in the paradoxical idea of preservation and openness to innovation that memes exemplify. More specifically, it raises the question whether we can think of democracy, as well as of revolution as political realities that (1) exhibit memetic structures in their attempts to *augment given foundations*, to call upon Hannah Arendt’s terminology, rather than to introduce a radical change and (2) manifest through visual memes in order to gain popularity. It analyzes the Occupy Movement through the metaphor of the meme as well as the visual Internet memes of Occupy in order to illuminate the relationship between online and offline political action.

## 2. Occupy and Political Inclusion

In the United States, the Occupy Movement, which began with Occupy Wall Street on September 17, 2011, soon expanded nationally to become Occupy Together. It defined itself as “people-powered movement,” part of a “World Revolution” inspired by the Arab Spring (Occupy Wall Street). It has articulated its mission as the fight “against the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future” (About Us). The core ideals and beliefs of the Occupy protesters are eloquently articulated by Cornell West as follows:

*We the people* of the global Occupy movement embody and enact a deep democratic awakening with genuine joy and fierce determination. Our movement – leaderless and leaderful – is a soulful expression of a moral outrage at the ugly corporate greed that pushes our society and world to the brink of catastrophe. We are aware that our actions have inaugurated a radical enlightenment in a moment of undeniable distrust and disgust with oligarchic economies, corrupt politicians, arbitrary rule of law and corporate media weapons of mass distraction. And we intend to sustain our momentum by

nurturing our bonds of trust, fortifying our bodies, hearts, and minds, and sticking together through hell or high water in order to create a better world through a deep democratic revolution. (West, 2011)

The Occupy Movement thus sees itself as both profoundly democratic and revolutionary, as a movement representing physically a small percentage of the population of the United States and politically and culturally 99 percent of the world population. As Michael Waltzer aptly noted, “the U.S. occupiers speak for the 99 percent against the 1 percent, but the truth is that only 1 percent of the 99 percent have, so far, joined the Occupations and the marches” (2012, 1). In other words, Occupy poses political demands, but remains relatively small in numbers in terms of on-the-ground participation in the context of the United States, while at the same time it aims at addressing questions of inequality that apply to 99 percent of the world population. It has therefore opened a large cultural space for the redefinition of politics rather than for a popular and populist expansive political space. From the beginning, in the spirit of radical democracy, Occupy has not designated official leaders and has not issued any specific demands extending governance to all of its participants. It has thus offered a small-scale exemplary model of governance that they would like to see become the dominant official modality of the political in the United States.

### 3. Viral and Memetic Revolutions

In her seminal book *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt argues that the term revolution was first used in astronomy to signal “regular, lawfully revolving motion of the stars, which, since it was known to be beyond the influence of man and hence irresistible, was certainly characterized neither by newness nor by violence” (1963, 32). The word thus indicated a “recurring, cyclical movement” in the world of natural sciences and “restoration” in the realm of politics (ibid., 32-3). It gained its popular connotation of a radical break, new beginning, and violence during the French Revolution, for at this time it became associated with “a mighty undercurrent sweeping men with it, first to the surface of glorious deed and then down to peril and infamy” (ibid., 39). Arendt challenges this association by offering an alternative genealogy and meaning of revolutions by examining the ideas, spirit, and outcomes of the American Revolution. She further proposes that it is this paradigm, with its view of the revolution as an intentional augmented restoration, rooted in the notions of “foundation, augmentation, and conservation” (ibid., 194) that needs to be revived as a model of successful political resistance.

According to Arendt, the term revolution signals an important political dilemma, one that addresses both the past and the future from the place of the present. Revolutions occupy “the legendary hiatus between end and beginning, between no-longer and not-yet” (1963, 197). In speaking of revolution, does one try to reinstate a time past, such as the Roman Republic, the American Revolution, Tahrir Square? Can post-revolutionary change be allowed or does the revolution aim at preventing further change? According to Arendt, the American Revolution has offered a model for addressing the political inherently or intentionally open to change by design. It is the notion and spirit of “foundation” that makes *augmentation* possible and at the same times institutes a sustainable authority (ibid., 193). The American Constitution thus retains its authority precisely because, in its foundation, it was established as a modifiable document. According to Arendt, it is this foundation based American revolutionary spirit that must be understood, remembered, and continued.

A revolution modeled after the American Revolution and thus invested in “foundation, augmentation, and conservation” (Arendt 1963, 194) has a structure homologous to a meme. It functions as a cultural idea about what constitutes the political. In Dawkins’s language, it self-replicates, mutates, and yet preserves its core structure. Revolutions can act as agents of the establishment of a foundation for openness and change. To push this concept further, I argue that revolutions, according to Arendt exhibit structures similar to those of the memes, exemplifying the notion of endless openness as they are relevant and sustained, as long as they indeed accept, endorse, change and remain structurally open to additional transfor-

mations. In other words, modifications that are accepted are not ones that end the process of *augmentations* but allow further remixing.

However, there are two major problems with Arendt's valorization of the American Revolution. The first emerges from the premise that revolutions rooted in the concepts of *foundation*, *augmentation*, and *conservation* prevent substantive structural changes of the political and foci rather on maintenance and modification of an existing system. It is the paradigm of a revolution modeled after the French Revolution with its promises of possibilities of upturning, uprooting, replacing, and radical change. As W.J.T. Mitchell has argued with reference to Arendt, Occupy opened a "foundational space for justice, democracy, and equality" (2012a, 12).

The second problem stems from the privileging of the leadership of the "founding fathers" rather than an assessment of the role of the "multitude," of the masses that, in the case of the French Revolution, made dissent irresistible, irreversible, and uncontrollable. The French Revolution, as theorized by Arendt, emerges as a viral movement, a movement that explodes on the political scene, flares up, and dies down. In its virality, in its embrace of the multitude, Occupy has its most powerful revolutionary premise. Although Occupy itself did not demand radical change in the existing political structure of the United States, it modeled, and thus visualized, an alternative, radically democratic and inclusive form of governance.

The Occupy Movement literally positions itself as an attempt to redefine the scope as well as structure of political participation in the United States. It did so through its evocation of the "Declaration of Occupation of New York City," where the protesters were to stand "as one people, united." The movement also deployed the phrase "we the people" widely across a variety of major statements and documents such as the website "Occupy We The People Decision Time for America," the 2012 film by G.G. Williams *Occupy – We the People*, and Petitions posted on Change.org titled "We the People – Occupy Wall Street '99ers".

By uttering the phrase "We the People" a central rhetorical device, Occupy signalizes a return to the ideals of the American Revolution as well as an attempt to augment its outcome. More specifically, Arendt adopts the American Constitution as the best example of authority derived from the institution of a political imaginary rooted in foundation, augmentation, and conservation. Occupy's revolution, by contrast, attempts to re-imagine the role of the viral multitude of the downtrodden, the unjustly suffering 99 percent in the articulation of a new political imaginary through its self-construction of a "leaderless and leaderful" movement, as West (2011) put it. In its actual constitution, it modeled an alternative to the state and the party political body. As W.J.T. Mitchell argues, it became a "soft revolution," an "infectious mimicry" of Tahrir Square's "hard revolutions" (2012a, 8). While it did open up the space of governance, Occupy failed to address the foundational and conservational ideology of the American Revolution. Even though the movement claims that it seeks radical political change, its Declaration of Occupation does not sufficiently address such an anti-foundational approach. The Occupy Movement thus went viral, but it has retained a mimetic structure aimed at merely augmenting by broadening the scope of political participation and the political imaginary behind "We the People." Thus, it addresses the pressing needs and discontents of the 99% of downtrodden Americans. In other words, it failed to establish, amongst its central claims, that its model of "leaderless and leaderful" governance can structurally redefine national politics.

#### 4. Occupy's Memetic Structure

The Occupy Movement attempts to remix a political system that had become immune even to the idea of change and in turn has been remixed and restructured by its participants. Firstly, Occupy radically transformed the meaning of the word "occupation" away from military occupation into democratic revolution. It performed "an uncanny repetition and parodistic mimesis of a preexisting condition, namely, the occupation of the world by a global system that has oppressed and impoverished the vast majority of the world's population and degraded the environment at the same time" (Mitchell 2012a, 12).

Secondly, the openness of the movement allowed for further remix of its title and mission. The Occupy movement in and of itself became a meme that could be modified, as Jake Coyle has aptly written of Occupy: “Call it the Meme Movement” (2011). Some of the remixes were in line with the original Occupy Wall Street agenda, for example Occupy Oakland as they repositioned the New York City-based protests across various cities and towns in the United States. Occupy Oakland saw itself as “more than just a speak-out or a camp out. The purpose of our gathering is to plan actions, mobilize real resistance, and defend ourselves from the economic and physical war that is being waged against our communities” (About Occupy Oakland). Others, by contrast, remixed the original message of Occupy Wall Street into a humorous strain of tweets. Occupy Sesame Street, a hash tag on Tweeter that emerged shortly after the original #occupywallstreet Tweeter thread, is representative of the parodic uptakes of Occupy Wall Street. The #occupysesamestreet tweets were “less strident and more absurd than those posted on #occupywallstreet, featuring messages such as “In a democracy, it's your vote that counts. On Sesame Street, it's your count that votes: “Ah-ah-ah” and “Truly outrageous that 99% of the cookies are consumed by 1% of the monsters on PBS” (Netburn 2011). Another variation of Occupy, called Occupy North Pole, declared itself as “a leaderless protest movement aimed at bringing awareness and reform to the inequality of cookie distribution between Santa and the bottom 99% of all North Pole Elves” (Occupy North Pole).

## 5. Occupy's Visual Memes

The “We are the 99%” online meme became not only the core message but also one of the main visual markers of the on-the-ground Occupy Movement. The “We are the 99%” political imaginary and visual imagery reflected precisely the “iconography of nonsovereignty and anonymity” of Occupy where the face and figure of the charismatic leader was denounced in favor of the face in and of the crowd, the assembled masses” (Mitchell 2012a, 9).



Figure 1: An exemplary image of the “We are the 99 Percent” meme (We are the 99 Percent).<sup>1</sup>

The “We are the 99%” slogan was initiated by a Tumblr blog in August, 2011 and soon became an extensive collection of reader submissions that came to define the face of Occupy (We are the 99 Percent). With this meme, according to the Know Your Meme website, “read-

<sup>1</sup> <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/we-are-the-99-percent> , accessed January 31, 2014.

ers were to express their solidarity with Occupy by submitting “a photo of themselves holding a sign with a single sentence about how America’s financial situation is affecting their lives” (We are the 99 Percent). The curated Tumblr blog, on which the meme originated, soon became “a potent symbol for the protesters occupying Wall Street and cities across the nation” (Flock 2011). The “We are 99%” meme entries consist of a photograph and a written paragraph and are highly formulaic in structure. Most images feature a partially visible individual, holding a white piece of paper that details their story of poverty, corruption, and repression, which in turn ends with the slogan “I am the 99 percent.” The example shown in Figure 1 is a good example of the form and content of this meme. The text that accompanies each photograph is a transcription of the handwritten message within the image itself. Despite its heavily textual content, the “We are the 99%” meme can be characterized as a visual Internet meme because of the preference of the photographic submission and its ultimate goal: to visualize and thus validate the claim that Occupy represents culturally, rather than politically, a large portion of the population in the United States. The meme was able to reveal some of the faces of the 99%, giving them equal weight in the spaces of both political and cultural representation.



Figure 2: Occupy Poster titled “99 percent” by Noah Scalin (Source: Occupy Print).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 3: Occupy Poster titled “Rise Up” by Lmnopi (Source: Occupy Print and Lmnopi Recent Works).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://archive.org/details/flickr-ows-OccupyWallStreetPoster-6221571650> , accessed January 31, 2014.

Symbolically as well as ideologically the Occupy Movement harkens back to many revolutionary moments, from the Arab Spring to the American Revolution. In its iconography, by choosing the raised fist of a white man as its logo and thus as its core Internet identity image, Occupy Wall Street has established an allegiance to the labor movements of the 1920s and 30s as well as to the October Bolshevik Revolution. An analysis of the online and print posters used by Occupy posted at [Occuprint.org](http://Occuprint.org) reveals that a large number of posters feature the “99 percent” theme as their main verbal slogan. A few posters, however, make the attempt to express the idea of the 99% visually.

For example, in the poster shown in Figure 2, the number 99 is represented by means of an image showing the silhouettes of some 40 *people* assembled in the shape of the number 99. In contrast to the cover of Hobbes’s philosophical treatise<sup>4</sup>, the collective of people shown here does not constitute a Leviathan. Instead, it represents the number 99. By this strategy, the authors represent to the vast inequality between the rich and poor of the United States and the world in general. In another image, exhibiting the slogan “Rise Up – We are the 99%” (Figure 3), the *people* behind the 99% are pictured through a rasterized filter effect applied to a photograph of a woman. This filter transformed the photograph into a graphic and rendered its subject as both generic and anonymous. This representation offers a faithful translation of the online meme, as it favors the anonymous individual. It moves away from photographic into graphic representation and thus asks for symbolic representation of the whole of the 99% by the one woman. Here we encounter the juxtaposition of the slogans “We are the 99%” and “I am the 99%,” which, in turn, speak to different visual and political representation strategies: the visualization tactic of “one for all” rather than “all for all.” The posters of Occupy thus move away from the original concept behind the meme that a multitude of individuals, constituted through a similar visual and political framework, make up the 99%. The posters either treat the meme as a slogan, or translate the visual structure of the meme into a dual figuration strategy, according to which anonymous multitudes construct recognizable figures.

The idea of “99 percent” prompted parodies both in the popular media and on the Internet. South Park, for example, mocked the “We are 99%” meme in Episode 12, Season 15 titled “1%” (South Park Studios 2011). The idea of “99%” is represented here by 99 fourth-graders in elementary school that have “ganged up” against Cartman, who in a class of 100 students represented the 1%. The Occupy movement is pictured as insignificant and unfair. In this episode, two boys become the voice of the 99% movement: they speak to the Superintendent about dropping the 1% and later are seen quietly and timidly holding “99%” signs, while Michael Moore is voicing his solidarity with and at them via a megaphone. The real “99%” movement is actually made up of the customers of the restaurant Red Robin who do not have any political demands and are not even aware of that they are part of an organized movement. The “We are the 99%” meme also prompted its own spoofs and parodies on the Internet, such as the examples posted on the Slacktory website (Douglas 2011). Online, the “99 percent” meme was remixed into opposing or mocking sites such as the “We are the 53 percent” blog, which claimed that only 53% of Americans pay taxes and thus opposed the idea that 99% of Americans face political social and economic inequality. In another blog, called “I am the 9 percent,” the population of the United States is divided by hand dexterity to highlight the discrimination that left-handed individuals face. These blogs mock the division of 99 versus 1 percent that Occupy has claimed to be central to their political agenda as arbitrary – as only one way among many that populations can be divided, oppositions established (Flock 2011).

The evocation of the political imaginaries of “We are the 99%” and “We the people” of both Occupy and the United States are always and already imbricated in the duality of the citizen and the mob that according to Giorgio Agamben has historically shaped the word “people” in and of itself (2000, 29). “People,” according to Agamben, “designate in common

3 <http://occuprint.org/Posters/RiseUp> and <http://lmnopi.blogspot.com/p/stencil-works.html>, accessed January 31, 2013.

4 For an extensive discussion of Hobbes’s imagery see Horst Bredekamp’s essay “Thomas Hobbes’s Visual Strategies.”

parlance and in the political lexicon alike the whole of the citizenry as a unitary body politic [...] as well as those who belong to inferior classes” (2000, 29-30). Furthermore, the word *people* signals

a dialectical oscillation between on the one hand, the *People* as a whole and as an integral body politic, and on the other the *people* as a subset and as fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies; on one hand an inclusive concept that pretends to be without remainder while, on the other hand, an exclusive concept known to afford no hope; at one pole a total state of the sovereign and integrated citizens and, at the other, the banishment – either court of miracles or camp – of the wretched, the oppressed, and the vanquished. (Agamben 2000, 31)

For Occupy, the “We are the 99%” slogan and meme visualized the idea that 99% of the population of the United States, and the world more broadly, has increasingly been constituted as a *people* and not as *People*. The inclusive exclusion of the 99% departs urgency upon Occupy’s call for fairness and equality precisely because of its large scope. The ‘fragmentary multiplicity’ of the 99% is juxtaposed against the wealth and power of the 1% of Americans.

“We are the 99%” visualized one of the core tasks of the Occupy Revolution: namely the rearticulation of “We the People,” and thus the augmentation of the foundation of shared governance into an inclusive structure. Its humorous remixes visualize the dissonance and complexity that characterize the American system of governance – hence the political representation of “We the *people*,” as well as its cultural images and imaginaries about its governance – hence the cultural representation of the populous.

## 6. Visual and Political Autoimmunity

Bernard Harcourt has aptly characterized the Occupy Wall Street movement as “political disobedience” that “fundamentally rejects the political and ideological landscape that has dominated our collective imagination in this country since before the cold war” as opposed “civil disobedience” which does not challenge the core political structures and instead focuses on questioning the “moral authority of the resulting laws” (Harcourt 2012, 33). Political disobedience further refuses specific demands, singular definitions, and official leadership. Occupy thus emerged as a movement challenging the current structures of the political in the United States.

“Occupy Wall Street” and “Occupy Together” took on the task of questioning the economic as well as political imaginary of the United States – a radical proposition that posed a threat to American capitalism as W.J.T. Mitchell has argued (2012a, 9). Occupy further targeted the idea of government, and big government in particular (Harcourt 2012, 36). This threat, I argue, is further directed at the nation-state, as Occupy modeled “leaderless” governance and thus provided an alternative modality of sovereignty that could spill beyond the square, into the camp, and all over the state if left unchecked. The protesters were seen as both *People* and *people*, to use Agamben’s distinction, by the Obama Administration: as both defenders of democracy and future voters – hence constituents of the state in their citizen capacity, but also as delinquents, as rogues in their participation in the protests. The “99%” thus constitutes of members who are both friends and enemies of the state. Occupy’s attempt to open up the space of the political and the space of sovereignty and the response of the Obama administration illuminate precisely what Derrida has articulated as the “constitutive autoimmunity” of democracy. The oscillation between *People* and *people* of the “autoimmunitary” response of the state towards revolutions is powerfully captured in Michael Taussig’s documentation and assessment of the Occupy Wall Street Protests at Zuccotti Park as riot police threaten to “clean up” the protests from the heart of the city (Taussig 2012, 88).

Jacques Derrida has eloquently argued in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* that “in its constitutive autoimmunity [...], democracy has always wanted by turn and at the same time two incompatible things: it has wanted, on one hand, to welcome only men, and on the condition that they be citizens, brothers, and compeers, excluding all others, in particular bad citi-



zens, rogues, noncitizens, and all sorts of unlike and unrecognizable others, and on the other hand, to offer hospitality to all those excluded” (2005, 63). The state thus must appear democratic enough through its conditional hospitality and yet must protect itself against the threat of dissolution that such hospitality might result in. The state body must be hospitable to the viral movement only in as much as it will make it immune thus stronger in the end. In its attach of the viral invaders however, the body does not gain immunity, but rather proceeds to acquire autoimmunity as it leads an immune response against its own constituents, thus leading to self destruction.

The “autoimmunitary process”, as theorized by Derrida, “is that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity” (2003, 94). This autoimmunitary process targets both the internalized external threats to the state, such as terrorism, as well as internal threats, such as political dissent. The suppression of dissent thus highlights the quasi-suicidal actions of the democratic state as it relies on a multiplicity of positions for its own health and longevity.

In the case of Occupy, the autoimmunitary process was manifested through the violence and detentions unleashed upon the protesters – encampments were barricaded and raided by riot police, protesters detained and jailed for prolonged periods of time (Editors 2011). The Obama administration allowed some hospitality to the dissidents, yet it was always deeply conditioned in terms of both time and space. The autoimmunitary process of the state in the realm of the digital reinforced the idea that because of digital participation in cultural and political issues, democracy is alive and healthy and furthermore revolution is possible but trivial and even unnecessary.

The autoimmunitary response to viral political dissent has been inextricably linked to imaginaries and images of the constitution and constituents of legitimate politics. As W.J.T Mitchell has eloquently argued, “Occupy has [...] reversed the meaning of the notorious contemporary image of the camp, exemplified by the detention center; the tent city, for so long the emblem of refugees and displaced persons, has been transformed into a site of gathering resistance” (2012b, 7). In this act, to go back to Agamben’s argument, it attempted to reinstitute the *people* as the *People* in the American as well as global contexts. Furthermore, in conflating the spatial image of the camp with the temporal imaginary of occupation as habitation rather than employment, the movement has illuminated the integral role that dissent plays in the shaping politics as every day practice. Occupy thus has rendered visible precisely the autoimmunitary apparatus of the state that seeks to suppress unrest and dissent in order to defend the state from the potential danger of falling in a state of nature. As Mitchell has further observed, Occupy rendered “hypervisible the response of threatened government authorities” (Mitchell 2012b, 5). Through all of its reiterations, the movement has highlighted precisely the multiplicity of sites in which the state’s repressive apparatus attempts to quarantine political dissent. Moreover, these moments of rendering the hypervisible autoimmunitary state assemblage are neutralized in the public imaginary by their uptake as visual Internet memes. Here, the trauma of revealing the “healing/repressive/cleansing” apparatus is dealt with through participatory humor, as seen for example in the augmentation of the “We are the 99%” meme into the “We are the 2%” meme. Visual Internet memes thus undermine the work that dissent movements contribute in explicating the securitization mechanism of the state. They provide safe space in which through mockery images and imaginaries of repression are rendered mundane and even humorous, assuring the central and commonsense primary purpose of the state to defend itself against internal and external threats. In other words, visual memes act as an informal autoimmunitary mechanism.

It is in the space of the symbolic, in the world of the digital, that the openness thrives. As Henry Jenkins has argued, with the development of new media, a new form of “digital democracy” that is “decentralized, unevenly dispersed, profoundly contradictory, and low to emerge” is being articulated (2006, 208). But can the space of “digital democracy” be the space of “digital revolution?” As a post on *GOOD* asks “Will we remember Occupy Wall Street as the Tumblr Revolution?” (Graham-Felsen 2011) An article by Jake Coyle on the Huffington Post website asserts the opposite: that although the protests were “originally conceived as ‘the Occupy Wall Street meme’” the success of the movement has been “based on

its old-fashioned, off-line demonstrations” (Coyle 2011). The emergence of phrases such as digital democracy and claims that Occupy Wall Street has been extensively driven by online social media and is therefore a Tumblr Revolution speak to a larger question: to what extent is the space of digital media the place of politics? According to the same post on *GOOD*, one Tumblr was used mostly for entertainment, but the meme “We Are the 99 Percent has transformed Tumblr into a political battleground” (Graham-Felsen 2011). Coyle proved a counterpoint by suggesting that “though the Internet is an essential tool for amplifying a message, it inevitably leads to frivolity and parody” (Coyle 2011). I question whether the participation of a small percentage of Internet users in political issues, which in turn represent 99% of Americans, constitutes a significant digital political sphere. I am suspicious about the extent to which digital space can be utilized effectively for political dissent and I argue that digital space has remained the space of the civil and the cultural, and not of the political.

Considering the predominant use of the Internet by users for entertainment purposes as well as the ever-expanding corporate control of cyberspace, I argue that digital democracy, as participatory and decentralized as it might be, functions within the hegemonic political narrative of the state. Its revolutionary potential - I suggest - is curtailed to a large extent by its highly structural nature, which often becomes translated into structured formulaic content as well. Used to advocate for Presidential candidates or to make other specific political demands, it reworks traditional politics but does not transform the political itself. The digital democratic nature of the visual and cultural memes associated with Occupy however addresses and neutralizes precisely the attempt of the movement to reshape the political itself. Whereas “digital democracy” has proven effective in what Ben Harcourt has theorized as “civil disobedience” – disobedience which aims to “challenge the governing laws by demonstrating their injustice,” it has failed to support and legitimize “political disobedience” – the resistance to the “very way in which we are governed” (Harcourt 2012, 34). The visual Internet memes of Occupy have taken up this notion of ambiguity as precisely the viral threat that needs to be neutralized by reworking political ambiguity into cultural humorous polysemy. In other words, the visual Internet Memes of Occupy such as “We are the 99%” diffuse precisely the virality of the movement.

The space of “digital democracy,” in which the visual memes as well as humorous modalities of Occupy flourished, faced less censorship and suppression. In the arena of the visual digital world, viral movements were given more time to develop, thrive, and dwindle away. The virtual memes built immunity in the digital democratic world but also helped reinforce the autoimmunity processes of the state in the analog world. In other words, the non-interference in the arena of the digital reinforced the claim that we live in a democratic state – a state in which Internet users can and do indeed express their freedom through creative expression. The digital participatory archive emerged as proof of democratic political structure, even though on the ground protesters were prosecuted heavily by the state in a highly undemocratic fashion.

The uneasy relationship between the Occupy Movement and its visual and cultural memes raises questions about the role of openness, change, ambiguity in the existence of the democratic state. The return of the extensively symbolic revolution is crucial for the sustainability of the state, whereas the participatory open democratic revolutionary process is feared and restricted. Whereas Occupy attempted to undo the existing political structures in and of themselves, memes – highly structural units in and of themselves - worked to stitch back a common normative imaginary of democracy in the realm of the digital as well as analog political worlds. The visual Internet memes, through their rigid structures and modifiable content, provide additional support behind the idea of foundations, augmentations, and conservations that soft, and I add conservative, revolutions such as the American Revolution as well as Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Together foster. They further diffuse the notion of virality that threatens to overflow, to contaminate the already established political body through the guise of digital participatory democracy.

## 7. Democracy and Revolutionary Movements

The relationship between democracy and revolution is a twice autoimmunitary one. On the one hand, revolutions, in the name of democracy, reveal the limits of hospitality of the state towards those who, in a democratic fashion, question its legitimacy and attempt to broaden the scope of those who participate in shared governance. They thus illuminate the autoimmunitary structure of the state. On the other hand, revolutions, in the name of democracy, also have to care for the hospitality of ideas. Can a revolution which is truly open to change and evolution sustain itself? Or are all revolutions to some extent autocratic? In other words, will democracy in a revolutionary movement result in humorous undermining expressions such as Occupy North Pole, or can democracy in a revolution produce viable meaningful resistance, where meaning is still shared and carries political weight?

Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Together in the US context did form a “meme movement” – one that remixed or augmented the notions of occupation, *people*, and *People*. It was further open to variation, as one could seriously or jokingly occupy everything and anything: Oakland, Sesame Street, or the North Pole. Furthermore, Occupy relied on the “We are the 99%” visual Internet meme for its outreach and definition. It presented thus an attempt to the space of politics where the ideas of foundation and augmentation have been the driving ideological as well as structural forces. Occupy is open to interpretation. The movement however did not take on the project of radical change, break, and rupture of the existing political structure. Its most radical proposition: the modeling of viral leaderless political space was neutralized quickly in large extent by the “99%” meme which became a core recruiting device and subsequently a formulaic visual and textual shortcut – a slogan and a figure.

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