

OBSERVING *OKKUPAI*: PRACTICE, PARTICIPATION, POLITICS IN MOSCOW'S MOVABLE PROTEST CAMP

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These are a few raw reflections on Moscow's *OkkupaiAbai* protest as a direct democracy experiment, in relation to organizational process (practice) and to the Occupy movement. What I present is fragments of the longer story of Moscow's *Okkupai* protest, otherwise known as "*narodnye gulianiia*" (people's festival), "*dobryi mobil'nyi lager*" (good mobile camp), and so on. I have followed its development and attended it sometimes daily, later one or two times a week for one and a half months of its active existence. My reflections, like any other participant's, are fragmentary. This story in itself is a part of the broader picture of Russia's white-ribbon movement.¹ My perspective is that of a participant observer with a history: I will refer back at points to my experience of the Occupy movement and "consensus" organizing in the UK, as well as to transnational online conversations within the "global" Occupy movement, and reflect a little on my position at the end of this article. I have intentionally avoided going into the detail of political visions, which are of course very different between Occupy and the white-ribbon movement.

By way of background, here is a rough timeline of these two months.

May 6, 2012—Mass protest ahead of Vladimir Putin's presidential inauguration ends with a confrontation with riot police, in which 660 people get detained and many injured by police.

¹ I.e., the protest movement that began with rallies against election fraud during the parliamentary election in December 2011. I use the term "white-ribbon movement" as white ribbons are a commonly recognized symbol of it, although some of the people involved in the events I discuss here (particularly from left-wing activist groups) may not identify with it. My use of the term is intended to avoid more ideologically circumscribing and likewise controversial labels ("anti-Putin," "pro-democracy," *grazhdanskoe dvizhenie*, or civic movement, etc.).

May 7–9—Mobile “festival” in defiance of police repression. To avoid breaking the law on protest authorization, the participants have no banners or chants, only white ribbons and songs. This continues through the night, is dispersed by police several times, and reassembles in a different place in the city center every time. On May 8, the “festival” stays next to the monument to Abai Kunanbaev.

May 10—Return to Abai’s monument (#OkkupaiAbai is first used), food distribution and info board are established, first lectures take place. First Occupy-style assembly, organized primarily by the Occupy Moscow group, collects about 200 people. After this, assemblies gather nightly.

May 14—Controversy over the collection of donations in the camp among the assemblies, the groups running the large kitchen and security, and several public figures. Authorities estimate that the *Okkupai*-ers did 1 million roubles (£200,000) worth of damage to lawns near Abai, protestors step off the lawns.

May 17—*OkkupaiAbai* is dispersed, moves to a leafy square near Barrikadnaia metro station (so named to commemorate the events of the unsuccessful 1905 uprising, although I have not heard this symbolism evoked while at the *Okkupai* there).

May 19—Dispersed at Barrikadnaia, people who stay overnight move partly to Arbat; assemblies continue gathering at Barrikadnaia and so are separated from the round-the-clock *Okkupai*. Assemblies later try to gather at Arbat two or three times, then move back to Abai.

Through **June** the assemblies dwindle in size, though their working groups such as the communications (*agitatsiia*) group continue working on their own projects.

OCCUPY AND OKKUPAI

As the timeline makes clear, these events were not intended as a Moscow version of the Occupy movement by most of their participants. In fact, Occupy Wall Street was commonly referred to in Russian as *Zakhvati Wall Street* (*zakhvati* approximately translates “occupy” and literally means “forcibly take over”). The transliterated word *okkupai* (окупуай) appeared in relation to the protest first as a convenient Twitter hashtag, a humorous rhyme in conjunction with the name of the Kazakh poet Abai Kunanbaev under whose statue it happened to gather by chance.

But I see two crucial things that relate *OkkupaiAbai* to the worldwide Occupy movement on a deeper level. Firstly, a political vision that is not clearly defined and, partly thanks to that, designed to be inclusive. That is the logic of slogans referring to “the 99%”: practically anyone can say they are part of the overwhelming majority whose fate is being gambled with by governments, banks, and large corporations. That is also the logic of being against Putin’s regime or *zhuliki i vory* (“crooks and thieves,” a customary label for the ruling United Russia Party and generally the powerful elite in contemporary Russia). There is no direct, obvious connection between this and being in a square in a city center—part of the reason why both Occupy and *Okkupai* (and the wider white-ribbon movement) get accused of not knowing what they want. But their vision says simply: if you feel you have been made powerless, join us.

The second commonality is that being in a place together and organizing together is seen as an aim in itself. In English this is embodied in the slogan “This is what democracy looks like,” in Russian, Aleksei Naval’nyi’s “*My zdes’ vlast’*” (“We are the power here”). A number of people I talked to at *OkkupaiAbai* said things like, “The parliament of this country is illegitimate, so we might as well be the closest thing Russia has to a democratic body,” or “We are here to learn to work together, we are the civil society in this country.”² Therefore, figuring out how and whether autonomously organized structures work is a key concern not only for me but also for the *Okkupai* participants.

“LEARNING TO WORK TOGETHER”

Several of my interlocutors at *OkkupaiAbai* remarked that the “camp” was a unique space in Moscow because, unlike elsewhere in the city, you were encouraged to enter conversation with strangers. Friends were made within minutes, contacts exchanged.

After a few days, I started noticing ways in which this space was fragmented, divided between different groups that were present: several Trotskyist parties, nationalists, anarchists, representatives of Mikhail Prokhorov (liberal presidential candidate), and so on. Although these groups probably represented a small minority among hundreds if not thousands of people present at the camp in the evenings, the divisions among them mapped onto functional tasks of the camp. These functional divisions were, at least in the first week, not fixed: security functions passed between several crews (including an “antifa” team and a “nationalist” team), there was a vegan “Food Not Bombs” kitchen and a larger kitchen that went from being run by a mix of people to a much smaller operation practically exclusively run by the “nationalists.” The info center was primarily run by activists from Occupy Moscow and left-wing groups. Most of these groups, as well as human rights, feminist, LGBT, and environmental activists, ran workshops and lectures in the shade of the trees behind Abai’s back. During the first week, I noticed people, mostly strangers, increasingly trying to write me into the political divisions too: “Which organization are you from?”; “Are you with the Russian Socialist Movement?”; “Do you know where all the anarchists are?”

My experience with respect to political fractions at Occupy St. Paul’s in London was near opposite: although branded placards and flags by several organizations appeared there since the first day and their promotional materials continued being present, my impression was that the members of these groups who stayed active within Occupy London joined the camp’s own organizational structures and that there was no common assumption of group divisions along pre-established “party lines.” I see two main reasons for this difference: firstly, that Occupy in London presented more of an actual unified (if patchy) political vision and, secondly, that UK activism has more of a history of campaigns and protest activity that is put together without the participation of rigid organizational structures or political parties.

² Field notes, May 14 and 17, 2012.

The ways of coordinating the *OkkupaiAbai* camp's overall activity were constantly under debate. A person in charge (*komendant*) was appointed by Left Front coordinator and white-ribbon movement celebrity Sergei Udaltsov on the first day but was not recognized or known by most of the people I talked to. Some people who had previously taken part in Occupy Moscow (which held relatively small assemblies in public places around the city) started gathering and facilitating daily general assemblies based on those that run Occupy camps in the West (more about them below). At one point, a completely separate "organizing committee" was formed, which I had not been able to talk to in the time that it existed in that form. The assemblies remained the most lasting organizational structure of *Okkupai* but were never a gathering point to discuss *all* of the functional tasks of the camp, as the kitchen and security crew remained autonomous.

ASSEMBLIES

In *Okkupai*, assemblies and their set of consensus decision-making practices did not have the a priori authority they enjoyed in Occupy camps elsewhere. To put it simply, Occupy comes as a package deal with slogans, working groups structure, hand signals, and procedures for meetings already attached and ready for use and customization. In the case of Occupy London, these practices were already familiar to a significant minority of participants; the rest took them on as an integral part of what Occupy meant. In *Okkupai*, this package of practices was previously only known to a smaller minority who (as Occupy Moscow) had organized smaller assemblies in public places around Moscow for several months previously, and they competed or mixed with many possible other ones on offer. An example: in one of the first assemblies, the moderators suggested trying out the "human microphone" technique to make sure everyone heard what was being said. This is the practice where the speaker divides what they say into short phrases that get repeated by everyone who can hear them, therefore enabling any speaker to be heard while not talking over the listeners and also, as described by Occupy London participants, giving the listeners the experience of saying something they do not necessarily agree with. At the Moscow assembly, the moderators were interrupted by a man who ran up to the speakers' spot, introduced himself as an expert in public speaking, and started explaining how to project one's voice to talk loudly.

The assemblies, particularly the first ones, presented a heterogeneity of voices that resisted fixed agendas and discussions of particulars. Many speakers (from what I can tell, both affiliates of existing political groups and "independent" participants) appeared to see them as a chance to say something, perhaps something they had wanted to say for a long time, in front of a large audience, making some of the first assemblies into very general discussions on Russia's politics, as well as history and the future of the movement. So although the moderators/facilitators announced as part of the format that the discussion was to be limited to "practical not ideological" matters ("what we're going to do, how, and why"), in reality the topics were unlimited—unlike the scope for "practical" discussion, seeing as the kitchens and security were organized very independently and, after the first week, practically exclusively by a group that was entirely separate from the assemblies.

At one point, in the back rows of an assembly discussion on how *Okkupai* finance should be controlled, I got to talking to a member of the kitchen/security crew—the group that my interlocutor and others identified as “the nationalists.” He said that his group felt disempowered by the assembly, which was trying to monopolize donations at the camp, while they (the nationalists) were doing all the hard work of organizing food and security and the assembly was doing nothing but talking. I asked if they would consider bringing the issues of food and security to the assembly and letting people from other political groups (or none) into the working groups. He responded negatively: it was easier to keep things in-house, “among the people we know can do the work.” The exclusion of the camp’s general population from kitchen and security tasks fed back into the exclusion of “the nationalists” from the assemblies and vice versa. To make matters more difficult, the assemblies were resistant to recognizing political groups within the camp *as* groups, like “the nationalists” wanted to be recognized. Later this group learned to take advantage of the assembly process by showing up en masse to influence or block decisions on finance. Many other activists of the white-ribbon movement also felt alienated by the assemblies as something inefficient or impossible to make productive, a talking shop.

Meanwhile, the assembly process itself developed as a result of input from its participants. For example, an extended group of moderators succeeded at making rules and procedures more concrete and understandable. This allowed them to moderate successfully, on June 10, 2012, a joint session of the assembly and the discussion group on a general mobilization, convened by Sergei Udaltsov—a gathering of possibly 200 plus people including a number of journalists. New models, organizational charts, proposals for enlarging the assembly to become an equivalent to Russia’s *Obshchestvennaia palata* (Public Chamber, government consultative body) or organizing “national assemblies” online emerged: that is, “the assembly” has taken on its own life, only partially related to its origins in the Occupy assemblies.

FRICTION

Allow me to go back to my own experience for a moment. Within Occupy London and other groups that operate by consensus (i.e., by that same set of decision-making practices), the “process” allows for uncovering, and finding practical solutions to, situations where someone feels excluded from a decision or feels oppressed or silenced by another person or group within the process. These conversations require time, energy, and commitment to the wider group from everyone involved. Because of the way I have structured my discussion, I risk sounding as if I am portraying Occupy London’s assemblies as perfectly functional—but these mechanisms can and do fail; in extreme cases their failure breaks groups up. For lack of space, I will not go into examples here—there are other analyses of the movement that give a more nuanced depiction.³

³ For a basic but detailed review of issues in consensus organizing, as well as a short bibliography of cases, see Meta (2012).

Now, one upshot of this experience is that, as a social researcher, I cannot help but see microdynamics of activist events like *OkkupaiAbai* through the language and lens of experience in groups that organize using the “consensus” set of practices (e.g., Camp for Climate Action in the UK; see Lewis 2011). I have to be aware of this as, on the one hand, it allows me to analyze clearly situations of exclusion/disempowerment, such as the relationship of the kitchen and security crew and the assembly. On the other hand, this way of thinking may obscure, for example, the role of personal or leadership ambition in activist organizing, as consensus organizing usually actively discourages particular people taking on major shares of credit or responsibilities, whereas my Moscow acquaintances point out that personal credit and “activist fame” can often be a major, and explicitly stated, motivation for organizers here.⁴

But the problem is more complicated: both the “consensus” practices/vocabulary and the ethnographic tradition that I have been trained in (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Abu-Lughod 1990) tend to pay attention to microdynamics of power, to ways in which “the personal is political.” Whereas in the context of a movement like this, where there is no common practical framework within which political difficulties and differences are worked through, discussion of political (power-related) difficulties within the movement may evoke the lines of political fragmentation and provoke more conflict.

Anthropologist Anna Tsing (2005) argues that in transnational processes “friction” that occurs when narratives and practices are translated or transported from place to place is what makes them socially productive, what makes change possible. Similar to her example of narratives of India’s environmental movement reappropriated in Indonesia, elements of the Occupy movement, its memes, and its organizing practices take on separate, new “social lives” (cf. Ssorin-Chaikov 2003) in the Moscow white-ribbon movement. I feel caught right in the middle of this moment of friction.

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⁴ Field notes, June 12, 2012.