The Journal of Social Studies Research 38 (2014) 79–89

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Journal of Social Studies Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jssr

Occupy Wall Street as a curriculum of space

Sandra J. Schmidt*, Chris Babits

Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 West 120th Street, 420B Zankel Hall, New York, NY 10027, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 13 August 2013
Available online 11 September 2013

ABSTRACT

Although Occupy Wall Street may no longer appear in news headlines, the international movement provides a rich curriculum on space and protest that are worthy of contemplation in social studies classrooms and research. This paper looks historically at how location and free speech became linked and informed one another during the 20th century in the US. It then looks critically at three sites of Occupy in the US that reflect the contested public representations of occupation. The investigation of these critical incidents enables a discussion of how Occupy expands prior discussion of the linkage between space and protest while indicating how political, economic, and technological shifts change this relationship in the 21st century.

Introduction

On September 17, 2011, protestors began an occupation of New York City's Zuccotti Park. Inspired by the occupation of public squares in Tunisia and Egypt that toppled political regimes, Occupy Wall Street [OWS] appropriated the oft-used 33,000 square foot park in lower Manhattan as a strategic location from which to protest the symbol of economic inequality and corporatism: Wall Street. Chants of "We are the 99%," a reference to the immense wealth and power that the nation's wealthiest one percent possess, rang through New York City. Protestors criticized the relationship between government and business, voicing dissent about policies that privileged corporate rights over individual voice and economic well-being. The protestors were urban activists, college students, and homeless people, all of whom stood to benefit from a reorganization of economic structures. Few people could have envisioned what happened next. A political occupation, one where protestors refused to leave the privately-owned public space, OWS struck a nerve in the United States and around the world. In places like Detroit, Michigan; Dublin, Ireland; London, England; Madrid, Spain; Oakland, California; Seattle, Washington; and Washington, DC, the occupation spread. Occupy[1] joined local political movements to become a worldwide protest movement known by its use of space and economic critique.

OWS provided reminders that although rarely emphasized in social studies curricula, seizure of physical space has been a form of political activism throughout U.S. History. Accessing, manipulating, and controlling space has been a powerful strategy for gaining public recognition. Although the struggle over space is central to protest, lessons on messages, historical actors, and policies trump lessons involving spatial analysis. Claims to and contestation over space shape the evolution of public space as a site for and of political dissent, a right highlighted in social studies. The curricular messages about space impact young people's imagination of civic engagement and its ability to affect racial, economic, and environmental justice.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 212 678 3174.
E-mail addresses: ss4146@tc.columbia.edu (S.J. Schmidt), cmb2220@tc.columbia.edu (C. Babits).

[1] Occupy has been chosen as the encompassing term to refer to any or all Occupy movements. OWS is used to refer specifically to the arm of the movement located in New York City.

0885-985X/$ - see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2013.08.004

Occupy challenges us to consider, "How do contestations over space reflect and/or expand historical understanding of the relationship between space and civic action?" The following sections examine this question. First, we outline a framework that theorizes the production of space. Next, we provide a brief examination of the historic evolution of space in political protest. We then describe the data and analysis in our critical incident framework. The fourth section examines three critical incidents from the U.S.: the clearing of parks in Washington, DC, Oakland's general strike, and the choice to occupy Zuccotti Park in New York. Finally, we draw connections between Occupy and past political occupations, charting a place for the interrogations of contestations of space in the social studies curriculum.

Theorizing representation in public space

Our analysis of spatial organization and representation arises from literature about the demise and contestation over public space. Theoretically, public spaces belong to "the people" and exist in contrast to private spaces that are typically spaces of production and consumption owned by individuals or corporations (Fain, 2004; Staeheli & Thompson, 1997). The concept of public space arose with philosophical claims that democracy requires a "public" to which the government is accountable. People come together to define and protect their common interest and produce an outlet for dissent against the government. Recognizing that social and economic segregation often precludes a public from forming, nation-states and cities created integrated spaces accessible to people across these divides. In the past, public spaces have created locations for political protest but have rarely met the expectation of exchange across difference or the formation of a single public (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2000). Geographers note the recent demise of public spaces; increased corporate demands and protection against terrorism have increased government regulation and further excluded the public (Dikec, 2001; Smith & Low, 2006; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2006). Mitchell (2003) responds that such clamor about the loss of public space belies the regulation and contestation that have always marked public space (see also Dikec, 2001). He argues that public space cannot be removed from a larger geographic framework about the production of space.

Lefebvre (1991) argued that space does not merely exist; instead, it is produced. Lefebvre employed a Marxist critique to examine the (unequal) spatial distribution of capital and industry. He led other economic geographers in examining the manner in which the abstract ideas of capitalism became embedded in physical environments and lived experiences (Elden, 2004; Harvey, 1996; Massey, 1994). These lived spaces are of interest in public space literature because they are where protest occurs. Lefebvre (1991) helps us understand the contestation and possibilities for claims to space through a theory of representational space. He contends that representational spaces are ordered according to the social values of the users of space and the planners' representations of space. The tension between planners and users is essential. Each invokes particular signs to make claims about space. These signs reflect ideological values as well as perceptions generated from viewing the social/spatial world. We often contend that representations of space are conceived in a more uniform manner than the multiple social orders that are at play in people's perceptions of and practices in the spatial world.

Occupation and the contestation of space in U.S. history

Even if they are cursory, most states' social studies standards include coverage of protest movements wherein the space of protest should matter. Even more common are content standards about individual rights, such as freedom of speech and the right of the people to peaceably assemble. A focus on the historical spaces of protest helps educators teach the *locational conflict* between individual rights and occupation protest tactics. As geographer Mitchell (2003) reminds us, "Rights have to be exercised *somewhere*, and sometimes that 'where' has itself to be actively produced by taking, by wresting, some space and transforming both its meaning and its use…" (p. 81). Occupation of public and private spaces as a form of protest has forced courts to interpret the boundaries around the *somewhere* of assembly and speech. A brief examination of why and how groups chose particular sites for protests against systemic social injustices lays a foundation for understanding the contribution of Occupy to discourse on spaces for dissent.

European settlement of the "New World," often the starting place of secondary U.S. History curricula, represents the beginning of competing sensibilities about what it means to claim space. According to Taylor (2002), "Compared with the colonists, the Indians demanded less from their nature, investing less labor in, and extracting less energy and matter from, their environment. Tribes like the Algonquians possessed neither market institutions, the mentality of capitalism, nor exclusive, perpetual, and private property" (p. 191). The English brought the experience living in a society where land ownership embedded class hierarchy into the landscape. A century before, men of means began accumulating large tracts of common lands as a sign of their wealth. The peasantry found itself without access to common lands formerly used to pasture livestock and to gather fuel, herbs, and small game (Taylor, 2002). Land was understood as something that could be privately claimed and on which structures, fences, and usage could project meaning outward. This was in contrast to many Native tribes that valued the chiefs' function as land redistributor (Taylor, 2002). As such, English claims to space restricted the Natives' traditional ways of life. Ultimately, through a mix of disease and warfare, English views on property ownership dominated the North American continent.

The Declaration of Independence, the prevalence of free labor ideology in the nineteenth century, and Supreme Court decisions about due process and the Fourteenth Amendment upheld the sanctity of property that the early English settlers found invaluable. Although the nascent United States faced occupational protests (e.g., Shay's Rebellion occurred in public