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Occupy College Street : Notes from the Sixties



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People, Politics and Protests IV

Occupy College Street: Notes from the Sixties

Ranabir Samaddar

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Ranabir Samaddar *

Occupy College Street, 1966-69

Today, mainly in the West, occupy is the call of the radicals. Hundreds of articles, analyses, reports, and reflections have come out on Occupy Wall Street movement and other occupation movements elsewhere as in London. With the end of the occupation dismay has been also evident. Commentators have asked: whence did the tactic of occupation arise? How did rank and file democracy appear and survive at least for a while? And, why did occupation dissipate? What were the fruits of the movement? Have the gains lasted?

Yet in these recollections of moments of exhilaration and subsequent dismay there is an untold belief that this was something new. As a tactic occupation mobilised hundreds, often thousands of participants. Its spatial dimension was unique in the history of protests. It had broken many boundaries.

Against this background this note for a moment takes us back to the decade of the sixties of the last century in Kolkata when the insurgent movement in West Bengal had taken to occupation and had developed the tactic, which helped the movement to crystallize and caused ironically at the end the undoing of the mobilisation. Occupy as a tactic thus has a history and the radicals of today perhaps in their enthusiasm for the new left ethos have ignored the history of the insurgent tactics of the past – especially tactics developed in the postcolonial context. Once again it was the popular nature of a movement that had helped the new tactics to emerge.

Take the tradition of *gherao* in West Bengal, which began in a strong way in the 1960s. *Gherao* means encirclement. It is a word originally from Hindi or Bengali or perhaps from some other Indian language, and denotes a tactic of labour activists in India.¹ It is like picketing. Usually, workers would keep a management boss, or a factory owner, or a management or government building under *gherao* until their demands would be met, or answers given. This tactic was advocated in a big way as a means of workers' protest by Subodh Banerjee, the PWD and Labour Minister respectively in the 1967 and 1969 United Front Governments of West Bengal. *Gheraos* became the occasions when rebellious workers showed that they disagreed with the managers and bosses by standing or sitting around persons in authority and not letting them leave until they agreed to do what the protesting workers wanted. *Gherao* became the site of assembly of mass of workers picketing, sitting, slogan shouting, throwing questions at bosses, and waiting with courage or in trepidation, apprehension, or resignation for the police and the goons to appear any time, pounce upon them, and free the bosses. Jute, engineering, and tea industries witnessed at times violent encirclement protests by

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workers. Police intervened to take out and thus rescue the persons under *gherao*. At times, encirclement continued overnight and for hours. Bombs were hurled on the picketers; goons were let loose on them. And the police was always on call.

The tactic of *gherao* was deployed in jails also at that time, when jailed activists (for instance in Medinipur Central Jail in 1970) demanding improvement of living conditions and better treatment of prisoners by jail officers and warders stood their ground outside their wards and cells and refused lock up. The prisoners were mercilessly beaten, kicked, dragged inside, torched, maimed for life, and few eventually killed. Such incidents took place in other jails at that time.²

Besides *gherao*, one more word became popular. It was *abasthan*, which would mean camping in, sit-in, picketing. *Abasthan* indicated flexibility in tactic. It could or could not have meant *gherao*. It could mean sit-in anywhere in support of a charter of demands. In this way East Esplanade became a place of sit-in demonstrations on various issues by various agitating groups. It could continue for days and nights. Yet it is a safer ploy, as it was cordoning or encircling anybody and preventing the freedom of movement. Sit-ins by teachers, tram workers, or groups of workers were familiar scenes in the mid-sixties in the city. Coming back to *gherao*, while *gherao* made the city of Kolkata infamous and became irretrievably associated with labour movement in West Bengal in the decades of sixties and seventies in the last century, and made the radical a figure of terror, the most noticeable use of this tactic was made by the rebellious students and youth of that time. *Gheraos* of principals of colleges became familiar incidents. Of course the famous case was the event of *gherao* of the Principal during the anti-expulsion movement in Presidency College, supported by the broad student community, in 1966-67. Before that happened the *gherao* of Eden Hindu Hostel in 1966, when the boarders of the Hostel went on hunger strike with their demands for improvement of the living conditions of the hostel; they picketed at the gate of the hostel for three days and nights, confining the superintendent of the hostel to his residence in the hostel building, eventually forcing him to resign. The *gherao* of the historic hostel established in 1886 shocked the educated middle classes of the city. Subsequently, the Principal of the Presidency College was *gheraoed* by the students with a charter of demands.

The movement against the expulsion of radical students in September 1966 led the students to encamp in the college. The college was closed sine die and eventually opened after six months when the expelled students were accommodated in other colleges. The long closure of the college helped the students to stay put at the gates, inside, and in the locality. Gradually, this became a fine technique, which would mean rebellious students camping in the college at night, and the college running as usual during the day. The college lawn became the meeting ground for political discussions, strategy meetings, consultations. It was a rendezvous site, also a control room, where news of any attack on radical students or youth in any part of city would reach fast, support for comrades under attack would be mobilised, and help would be sent at Godspeed. In time, both in the college and the hostel, crude bombs (called *peto*) and other handy tools for self-defence would be stored. After the dusk fell, the college lawn, the portico, and the corridors reverberated with animated discussions, exchanges of views, only to become silent as night progressed and weary, tired activists fell asleep. By morning the cadres would leave the precinct, the college would be returned to its due owners – students, teachers, administrative staff, police spies, etc. As evening approached, the students and youth activists had to be alert about informers and spies, the ever present possibility of police contingents suddenly landing in the college to pick up the wanted and other activists, and at night whispering voices of volunteers on duty were to awaken the occupiers to the marching sound of the boots of a police party ready to swoop down on unarmed youth and student activists.

Who camped in the college? During the day, the union room, the canteen, the corridors, were frequented by the rebellious students of the college with some outside delegates joining them. However as the day ended, the number of outsiders, comrades of other student and youth units would join. The college would become what is called today the “commons” of radical forces. Representatives of other units and unions, and curious participants joined the virtual camp. The college in this way would be occupied.

While this narration of occupation of the Presidency College in 1966-68 has been probably recorded elsewhere and on more than one occasion, and the narration here is kept strictly limited to few lines, this should be enough however to tell us of the way space making went on as a vital part of a rebellious protest movement of that time.³ It is to that history of the occupation by students and youth who through their tactics were breaking old boundaries and creating new ones that the following lines are devoted. The heights to which an occupy movement can ascend and then fall are the lessons of this brief story.

First, in order to secure the college the vicinity had to be secured. Thus students had to go out to the neighbourhoods, visit slums, shops, dens, and pits to befriend the populace and neutralise the potential attackers. The vanity of birth and education had to be left back. If students had to be welcomed in the neighbourhoods, the rough and plebeian denizens of the lower depths had to be also welcomed in the college. Friendship led to comradeship, comradeship broke boundaries of college and outside. The college became the common. It was secured in this way.

Second, for the college to become an occupation camp of the students and other radical activists, links had to be forged with radical fraternities of other colleges, and equally importantly with other localities. Students had to be companions of youth. In this way, an “All Units” (units of students and youth organisations, and trade union solidarity platforms) was formed. The college precinct became the headquarters.

Third, no potential enemy was to be allowed in the area or immediately beyond. Intense education, conscientisation, deliberation, visits, and unionisation – all these became the mode of neutralising threats of terror. And failing all these, occasionally strong arm tactic was needed. In brief, in order to occupy the college, the neighbourhood had to be secured. This was the third boundary to be crossed.

Fourth, the occupy site had to become the general site of revolution. Thus, besides students and youth activists and leaders, union militants and organisers, political educators from the party who would take political classes in the evening, had to consider the college space as their own. Political discussion in this way crossed the boundaries of student community and created a generality. In those days, with few landline phones available, no computers, mobile telephony, and social media tools, delegates from units afar, for instance from North Bengal University, could come to College Street without prior intimation to seek advice or extend invitation to a meeting or conference, because they were sure to find someone in responsible position present in the college. That someone did not have to be a student leader of the Presidency College.

Fifth, the flexibility of the assembly was one root cause of the metamorphosis of the college precinct into an occupy zone. Flexibility helped crossing boundaries of education, institution, birth, locality, surveillance, and pre-determined schedule. Nobody declared that the Presidency College lawn was to be the headquarters; none inaugurated it; no celebrity came to visit the rebellious students and youth activists. It was an open university, a perhaps never to end workshop of ideas. Yet this was different from today’s occupy stories, because there were lines of command. Activists were not present there through twenty four hours of day and night. They went out on organisational tasks, came back, convened consultations, and took decisions. For this what

was needed was discipline, which was there to the required extent, but not excessive. The All Units had regular meetings, though there was no chairman, vice chairman, or general secretaries. The meetings were conducted strictly democratically. The units had equal status, and consensus on modes, methods, and programmes developed without much deliberate efforts. It was more of a coordination of units, though ironically the name by which it became finally known was Presidency Consolidation. The occupation was reinforced continuously through new ideas and new personnel generated by activities outside College Street, the college, and the city – in the factories of say Howrah or the villages of Medinipur. Students were no students if they were not red guards propagating ideas in villages, factories, and small towns. The youth were no youth if they had not offered their lives and energy for the “broader cause”.

There was also a historical reason as to why College Street and in particular, the Presidency College precincts became the occupation zone of the rebels with delegates coming from other areas to meet, discuss, and assemble. Through the nearly six-month long movement, Presidency College became the centre of rebellious students and youth of Bengal. The leaders of the movement became well known in radical circles and organisations. The University also was the centre of radical movements in fifties and sixties such as student mobilisations in anti-tram fare rise movements in 1953 and 1965, food movements in 1959 and 1966, student movements against educational policies of the government, and rise in educational expenses including tuition fees. Also from the late fifties student activists had been going to villages to stay with the peasants and mix with peasant activists. College Street occupation carried the legacy and bore the spirit of militant communist style of work.⁴

This was too good, too delicate a balance to last. As white terror mounted from 1969-70 and an atmosphere of fear enveloped the city, the efficacy of occupation as a tactic of struggle declined. Arrests, killings, torture decimated the insurgent ranks. The lane next to the college, Bhabani Dutta Lane, now stands as mute witness to the killings by the police of seven youth activists who belonged to the neighbourhood and had regular presence in the college in the evening. The police shot them dead at night, and now only the memorial plaque at the mouth of the Lane on College Street through its presence speaks of the time. The camp evaporated as years passed under white terror and activists became escapees. Finally when the activists, more than a decade later, after the violence subsided and “normalcy” returned, sought to recreate the tactic, the milieu of mass upsurge was over. The college once again had shrunk within its structural boundary. Occupying means creating also a boundary, which causes its restriction and eventual decline, in as much as it means modifying or transcending old ones. Occupying Presidency College depended on a combination of both. Hence it survived through tumultuous time. It remained unique. Perhaps if the tactic was replicated in other towns it would have survived, achieved greater success, longevity, and resonance.

Occupy Today and Elsewhere

Perhaps the tactic came back from the depths of popular memory in the early years of this century when on different occasions protesting people occupied various sites, such as agitating workers occupying the automobile factories in Gurgaon near Delhi and farmers and political activists occupying for days the road leading to Singur. Before that, in the decade of the eighties in the last century, farmers under the leadership of Sharad Joshi and Mahendra Tikait had occupied district headquarters respectively in Satara in Maharashtra and Meerut in UP in India.⁵ But we must not forget the workers occupying Kanoria Jute Mill in the beginning of 1990s. Kanoria Jute Mill was

the laboratory of autonomous workers' movement that ran the mill later under the collective leadership of trade union leaders like Prafulla Chakrabarty, Purnendu Bose, Kushal Debnath, Dola Sen, and others who shot to prominence because of the movement.⁶

The world over also reverberated in the sixties with echoes of occupation of factories and universities as in Paris in May 1968, and little earlier occupation of campuses in the United States in 1965-66 in protest against the Vietnam War. And indeed, Occupation Wall Street was preceded and followed by occupations in Tunis, Cairo, and Istanbul. In some cases occupation was a tactic. In others as in New York, occupation by itself became a goal, hence a strategy. Possibly the most massive occupation took place in Gezi Park in Istanbul in May 2013 with thousands of people converging and occupying with a set of specific demands, such as the preservation of Gezi Park from the tentacles of developers; end to police violence, the right to freedom of assembly and the prosecution of those responsible for the violence against demonstrators; an end to the sale of public spaces, beaches, waters, forests, streams, parks and urban symbols to private companies, large holdings and investors; the right of people to express their needs and complaints without experiencing fear, arrest or torture; and that the media must perform its professional duty to protect the public good and relay correct information, and to act in an ethical and professional way. The Gezi occupation drew global attention and spread mobilisation wide across the country. In some sense, the Gezi park occupation symbolised several of the features of the occupy movement of this century: multiple subjectivities, “non-politicised” goals, focus on a public space and by inference on public sphere, the spread of “take the squares” movement, and the subsequent exhaustion of the movement including the local park forums and its incorporation in electoral politics of the parties of order.⁷ The Gezi Park movement was not so much about rebellion but of social protest, which, it was claimed to have “brought attention to public space as way of enhancing and staging democracy as part of everyday practices of ordinary citizens”... It showed “the public sphere as a vital sphere of democracy, that should be open to everyone, not trapped in state authority or invested with capitalist ventures.”⁸ The occupation, the claim has gone further, thus transformed from a rebellious act to a “staging ground for the creativity of micro practices” and as “a public square movement it opened up a new arena of experience, and democratic opportunities growing and resonating from Istanbul, Turkey.”⁹ It was also claimed that with increasing unemployment and degradation of work, “the hollowing out of work...made the square a necessary political form, and the character of the square compelled a confrontation with the state, which could not answer the underlying needs even if it wanted to...” “The square now seems like the most natural form of refusal, resistance, and revolt... and this could go toward explaining why the latest movements of the squares have taken on an increasingly nationalist aspect, such as Ukraine’s Euro-Maidan (literally, “Euro-Square”) movement.”¹⁰

Yet we have to remember that the occupation of College Street and the Presidency College precinct had no park to defend. It was not any square. College Street is a kilometre stretch of thin road crowded by a university and few colleges, which was hardly a natural point to converge, though there was the College Square, always a natural part of the College Street, but never a point of contention or occupation. Presidency College precinct and the College Street symbolised rather the widespread spirit of insurgent youth, political rebellion, and an ideology of revolt, and a network of insurgent organisations. In a sense this also implied defending College Street, but not in the sense of amassing hundreds and thousands of people to occupy the space as a focus of the movement. Possibly, this was reason, the flexibility if we like, that helped the mutineers to retain possession of College Street for nearly two years. Presidency College functioned in the day, the University functioned likewise; the College Square brimmed with children playing in the swimming pools;

radical literary functions took place, progressive publications rolled out from College Street (including the adjoining Keshab Chandra Street and Mirzapur); a theatre hall defended by youth volunteers from attacks of the toughs of the party of order (Minerva Theatre on Beadon Street staging *Kallo*¹¹) still staged revolutionary plays; and couriers and emissaries from fraternal organisations kept on coming in and going out talking of revolution. It was occupation of a different type. Perhaps purists will not call it an occupation. Perhaps College Street functioned as a base. Whatever may be the judgment, it is important to see how College Street was occupied. In a sense this was natural, given the history of association of the place with rebellious memories of the past – particularly memories of suburban and *mufossil* students, youths, and teachers coming to College Street and being sucked into the mutinies of College Street. In other words, space had not been idealised as yet. It was still a part of a general struggle. There is no doubt that the epic demonstration in the city in 1968 against the visit of Robert McNamara, the then World Bank President and earlier the US Secretary of Defence, known also as the butcher of Vietnam, was possible because of the flexible marshalling mode of the organisers of the All Units quartered in College Street. McNamara's cavalcade could not pass through the rebellious city to the Governor's House, his place of stay and meetings, and he had to be flown in a helicopter from the airport to the Governor's House.

Drawing from all these instances, we can say with some qualifications, wherever occupy was a tactic aided by and being part of a larger political movement, it met with bigger or smaller success. Wherever, on the other hand, occupy became a goal unto itself, it failed. In some cases as in the Indian Railway Strike of 1974, workers walked out of the workshops, plants, marshalling yards, stations, and offices, and declared indefinite strike. They did not occupy any square, any place of work, or any building. On the other hand, in case of Maruti struggle in 2011-13, workers occupied the plant. As we know, after a point the workers' leadership found occupation there ineffective and attempted to shift the site of protest elsewhere in the heart of the city of Delhi and thus make it mobile.¹² Elsewhere, in various places of Europe, migrants occupied with varying degrees of success churches, empty buildings, squares, and town halls to turn the latter into shelters. In 1947-51 in India too, refugees had occupied vacant plots and abandoned buildings and grounds with varying success. When refugees occupied in 1978 some of the vacant forest islands in the Sundarbans in West Bengal, they were driven out, arrested, and some killed in a police operation – an event known as Marichjhanpi massacre.¹³

Besides the fact that in Kolkata the occupation of College Street originated from the radical students with traditional communist background while in the West, occupy movements such as Occupy Wall Street has owed to a variety of political persuasions (new left, anarchist, do gooders, liberal left, environmentalists, feminists, etc.) with at times pronounced criticisms of communist politics, there is one more difference between the form of occupation of the Presidency College precinct and the College Street as a whole in the sixties and the occupations that happened decades later in the West. In the latter case, the occupiers focused on physical occupation of a place, enlarging the assembly there, improving the dynamics of occupation in that defined space, and posing that space as the counter-space of the power of Wall Street or the Westminster in London, and other seats of rule. On 27 September 2011 on a fateful night, the occupiers annexed a square block of Manhattan's financial district, called the Zuccotti Park, and renamed it as the Liberty Square. The occupation was a victory, and the occupiers hoped this to be the beginning of a global uprising against Wall Street tyranny. Yet there was no focused demand. As one observer put it, "in the third month of Occupy, life in the encampments grew more agitated and dangerous. Homeless people, un-tethered by political discipline, were conspicuous. Violence against women was reported",¹⁴ and further noted, "What was truly impossible to find in the vast reaches of

the Occupy movement---for more than three months---was a single demand, or a distinct package of them, or, indeed, any specific demands endorsed by the Occupy Wall Street General Assembly...”¹⁵ In Cairo, the occupation of the Tahrir Square in February the same year and around the same time, or in Athens the occupation of the Syntagma Square (2010-12) had however more defined aim, namely the removal of a particular regime. In case of Athens, the occupation also has a concrete nature. It was a part of a countrywide movement that built up the anti-austerity party, the Syriza. Perhaps the occupation of the Tahrir Square has inspired the occupation of Wall Street. What was noticeable in the occupation of Tahrir and Syntagma Squares was that both were busy traffic circles, high from the point of visibility, and natural sites of convergence of people from all sides in the two cities, and thus effective camping sites. Perhaps the difference owes at least partially to that of the political backgrounds and perspectives.

Fifty years back the Presidency College precinct occupation leading to College Street occupation was different. It was not a busy multi-road traffic junction, indeed the street was not wide at all as it is still not today, and not all kinds of public would naturally converge there. But the salient point here was that institutions such as the University of Calcutta, the Presidency College, the two prominent schools, the Hindu and the Hare, the Calcutta Medical College, the Institute of Welfare and Business Management, the City College of Commerce, and the Goenka College with the entire place surrounded by an arc of plebeian educational institutions, such as the Bangabasi College, Surendranath College, Vidyasagar College, City College (main campus), Maulana Azad College, and finally with hundreds of office goers landing in the city at the Sealdah Station made College Street – an initially unnatural but understandably a place of mobilisation and occupation. College Street up to Boubazar Street was for at least two decades before the sixties, a place of mobilisation of students and youth. The rebellious student and youth activists seized this legacy, and built their strategy of occupation on this history.

In that animated space called College Street there was also a considerable intermingling of students belonging to different persuasions. Three researchers in a meticulous study of student unrest that took place in the University of Calcutta in March 1969 analysed the responses to four student formations and found considerable overlap of opinions among student leaders of these formations. In Dasgupta’s account, the flexibility of the student activists in pressing their demands (mainly withdrawal of certain unfair administrative measures) is clear.¹⁶ The intermingling of students of various persuasions was evident in the student demonstrations against the visit of Robert McNamara in 1968.

There was one more crucial difference with today’s Occupy Movement. In Occupy Wall Street, the strategy was to converge and assemble, while in case of Presidency College there was no such strategy. Rather it was to use the place as the rebellion’s headquarter, and hence of contact and dialogue, a place to decide issues of deployment of cadres to go elsewhere to spread the message of unrest.¹⁷ It was thus the live centre of a growing network of points of upsurge. This meant that the external configuration of the place of occupation was as important as the internal configuration. How did the place of occupation look like? How effective was it? In other words, how did College Street matter *from the outside*? This question is different from the one, namely, how does the occupation matter *from the inside* that is internally, to the participants? The question is not one of a pure play of space, but of links, general nature, of the involvement of society at large – of a strategy that does not choose between a war of strategy and war of manoeuvre but combines both. Occupy College Street became crucial not only for the number of students and other political activists who spent days and nights there, but for others who would reach there for regular or occasional consultation. Occupy College Street or the Presidency College was thus the natural the site of organisation, while the All

Units (known as Presidency Consolidation) became the natural leader of the activities. We cannot think of College Street and the Presidency College without the All Units.

However, the inside and the outside of occupation - at least College Street and Presidency College precinct occupation - were not clearly marked apart two territories, temporalities, or figurations. In securing the College and the College Street, mobilisations from outside were needed, while for these mobilisations from outside to actualise the inside had to be at least partially ready to accommodate the “outsiders”. Slums played an important role. The Kalabagan slums and the lower middle class inhabited lanes of the area had traditionally produced toughs and for decades were utilised as foot soldiers of reactionary forces in communal riots and beating down radical demonstrations. Not only they were neutralised now, a large sections of the youth came forward to help the insurgents and several of them courted deaths in the ensuing battles with the armed police. Rooms for manufacturing bombs had to be found; walls and exit routes had to be identified in the event of escape, local units had to be built, shelters had to be pre-arranged. All these required rings of support – so first had to be secured the core area of College Street and the two precincts of Presidency College and the Eden Hindu Hostel, and then the nearby lanes, then the colleges and the surrounding localities, and in this way the outer peripheries were made one after another. This was a concentric circle where the inside and outside were mixed in a flexible mode. As was found out, this suited urban mobile struggles that were to characterise the city from 1969-71. But this also meant that the counter-insurgency forces now had to devise a strategy whereby they could secure one locality after another in opposition to localities dominated by the insurgents, to restrict the mobility of the rebels, and eventually to isolate them, cut out their exits, and kill them. This is how the Baranagar-Cossipore massacre happened. Other round ups at the dead of nights and shooting the activists down in say Beliaghata, College Street, Howrah, or Bagha Jatin-Jadavpur happened in this way. The State was already learning to anticipate urban mobile warfare and tackle it. The occupation with all its flexibility ended in the fire of battle. The rebels could not maintain and did not know how to maintain the flexible tactics of occupation in the overall war like atmosphere of the city.

The flexible tactics of occupation had not been designed as part of deliberate strategy, and hence these were not pursued later properly, and this led to its doom. The popular nature of the protest of the mid-sixties and its wide base made such flexibility around College Street possible. The State lost little time to learn the spatial features of the situation and plan counter-insurgency strategy. The para-military forces were deployed for cordon and search operations. The “outsiders” and the “enemies within” locality after locality were identified with the help of informers in these sudden, unannounced combing operations, and were picked up and killed or maimed for life, or jailed.

So the history of occupation is varied, so is the outcome. It is important to see them in the specific context in which occupy happens, the nature of popular mobilisation, and its overall relation with the broad revolutionary movement and the class forces. Occupy is an act in class war. And, even though its nature remains civilian its rules are framed or at least influenced by laws of war. Hence it is important to see it not as a war of position but as war of manoeuvre. It is a tactic, at least this was the case in Kolkata, developed in the sixties, just as popular movement in the forties and fifties developed other tactics of struggle such as stone throwing, burning buses and trams, mass mobilisations aimed at petitioning the Legislative Assembly, and occupying neighbourhoods of the roads where skirmishes with police force were on.

Boundaries of Occupation

This note has already alluded to the boundary redrawing capacity of occupation, and has shown how in the sixties in Kolkata it removed several old boundaries in as much as it created new ones. This feature had deep relation with the power and capacity of the occupation to deal with police forces, and to last for long time. Its correlation with flexibility was crucial in the new grammar of mobilisation.

What is this boundary, the *boundary of mobilisation*? This question has haunted strategists of mass mobilizations, particularly revolutionary mobilizations. The different answers advanced since then have offered different analytical tools to interrogate contemporary society, and to modes of intervention in popular politics. Is occupation a new form of representation? Is it a response to the crisis of old modes of mobilization? Is it a combination of the civilian and the military modes of struggle and if so, is this then the reason for its widespread deployment and “success”? But what would success mean in this case? How are we to make sense of the encounter between the occupiers and the State, occupiers and other forces, persons, and institutions of authority, between occupiers and non-occupiers, last but not the least between different groups of occupiers, say between those who knew how to make bombs and the scholarly types?

And yet again, how are we to make sense of a territory known as the ground of occupation – College Street, Tahrir Square, or Sorbonne and the Left Bank – the grounds of occupation that produced so many deaths, so much despair, utopia, memory, and calculations of conduct of an ongoing war? If all these signify old boundaries of space and politics being continuously broken through the act of occupation, they also signify *occupation confined to a space, occupation confined within a space*. The location in this way while giving birth to new critiques becomes a point of critique. It is like an army or perhaps a battalion asked to stand on a ground, keep it occupied - come what may - so that the war may be won either through the decisive action there or the occupation facilitating the decisive battle elsewhere.

We can also ask questions of relational ontology – say between the ranks of militants who occupied and the flying in and out leaders, between men and women, between the “natives” (locals) and outsiders or between student activists and trade union militants, or say between bomb throwing infantry of the assembly and the scholar activists. In other words, questions of these encounters problematised the faith call, “we are the ninety percent” that the Occupy Wall Street was to celebrate later. What made these encounters unique? Even though ephemeral as these encounters remained, they created a new territoriality called *occupation*. Conversely this new territory gave birth to several of these encounters. Boundary making and remaking was thus not only a practice of encountering, it was also an attempt to create a new and more open geography of power, seen in rudimentary form in party offices, clubs, and camps. There of course remained a difference. While a party office or a club has an official institutional existence, the occupy place or zone does not have, and in the sixties in Kolkata no one could say how long the rebellious activists would be able to occupy College Street. It lent urgency to the task of building up of networks, one may say, a frantic search for opening up new “possible”. It was an ephemerality that was transforming everyday existence.

Such questions push the issue of the physical existence of a collective and friendship within the collective towards an appreciation of political practices that exist beyond the remit of social movement politics. While geographers may help us to understand the relation between space and activism, the crucial thing to understand here is the creation of a generality as a practical act, not thinking-as-doing but doing-as-thinking – that is open, relational, and incorporating the multiplicity of struggles in different locations. In this respect if we think of the above narrated experience of

Presidency Consolidation, we shall then realize that the notion of political strength is often connected with the development of a collective through ongoing dialogues. These dialogues in the evenings transformed the days in the college/s also. The time and territory of struggle were also produced in this way. In producing the time and the territory, the network of organizations represented by the All Units (known as Presidency Consolidation) was important. Otherwise, the occupation of College Street would have been considered as metropolis-centric and negligent of the centres of radicalism in suburban, district, and *mufossil* towns like Howrah, Krishnanagar, Uttarpara, Bally, Chuchura, Malda, Siliguri, Medinipur Kharagpur, Panskura, Durgapur, Diamond Harbour, Burdwan, Suri, etc. In fact the participation of the latter made College Street. The Presidency College Lawn and the college precinct in this way helped the All Units to consolidate and its leadership to exercise sway over the rank and file. Control of the area became the key to control of events, time, and the people. The college as a camp created a new boundary, where encounters of various kinds took place and defined the nature of urban activism.

Yet the point to remember is that while boundary defining was central to this territoriality, yet flexibility had to be retained. There was recognition of the need to consider the space as an active process rather than as a fixed container or marker. The boundaries of the occupy zone were in constant flux and they were social processes taking place in particular spatial context. Occupation College Street became a strategy of flexible territoriality, where nothing was pre-given about what was to come. The boundaries of the College Street were thus constantly contested and often led to unknown outcomes. Encounters within that space were thus transformative. Presidency College campus (of occupation) led to the production of College Street – represented to and by the State as anarchic, violent, extremist, and the dry gun powder to explode any moment and anywhere. Yet the state could not appropriate it, because the way the space was being reproduced was beyond appropriation. Perhaps as Henry Lefebvre would have said, space attained its full meaning only when contrasted with “the opposite and inseparable concept of *appropriation*”.¹⁸ Power on the College Street in this way flowed from a kind of dialectical spatiality that made “possible tomorrow what was impossible today”.¹⁹ The equality, friendship, and comradeship under conditions of occupation generated a dialectical situation, which meant a refusal to accept the given ways of politics, even given notions of non-conformist politics and party building, and a resolve to master the conditions of existence. New politics came out of new territoriality born out of the need to occupy spaces outside the form of the State. These were “territories in resistance”.²⁰ To recall, there was no square or park to assemble or congregate and defend. The narrow lanes and streets, educational institutions, centres of cultural repertoires, publishing houses, slums, bookshops, lower class including lower middle class houses – were all laden with memories of street rebellions of years and decades. Resistance created the territory.

Yet we must remember that occupation also invites full scale annexation by the State. It invited violence on the College Street. The trend of the occupation activists to huddle back in the sanctuary of occupation proved in the long run a wrong tactic. The fault lines grew wider. While occupation undid many old boundaries, it drew new ones. Several of the denizens of the occupation site were killed by the police, others spent years behind bars, and the authority in the following decades changed the face of College Street indelibly. Camping on College Street unwittingly helped the secret police to identify the key persons. And when white terror came down the camp, the college, and all those who would assemble there in solidarity were trampled under boots of the paramilitary forces meticulously prepared for counter-insurgency task. Other colleges also paid heavy price.

Most occupations have failed under heavy police deployment. As Engels said of barricade fighting, each such attempt since 1848 had been drowned in blood and ended with the defeat of the proletariat and victory of the bourgeoisie. Yet does it mean that occupation as on the College Street in the sixties will no longer be possible? We can only pay heed to what Engels had said in the foreword in 1895 to the republication of Marx's *Class Struggles in France* with regard to barricade fighting,

Even in the classic time of street fighting, therefore, the barricade produced more of a moral than a material effect. It was a means of shaking the steadfastness of the military. If it held out until this was attained, then victory was won; if not, there was defeat...

The chances, however, were in 1849 already pretty poor. Everywhere the bourgeoisie had thrown in its lot with the governments; "culture and property" had hailed and feasted the military moving against the insurrections. The spell of the barricade was broken; the soldier no longer saw behind it "the people," but rebels, agitators, plunderers, levellers, the scum of society; the officer had in the course of time become versed in the tactical forms of street fighting, he no longer marched straight ahead and without cover against the improvised breastwork, but went round it through gardens, yards and houses. And this was now successful, with a little skill, in nine cases out of ten...

Up to 1848 it was possible to make the necessary ammunition oneself out of powder and lead; today the cartridges differ for each rifle, and are everywhere alike only in one point, that they are a special product of big industry, and therefore not to be prepared *ex tempore*, with the result that most rifles are useless as long as one does not possess the ammunition especially suited to them. And, finally, since 1848 the newly built quarters of the big towns have been laid out in long, straight, broad streets, as though made to give full effect to the new cannons and rifles. The revolutionary would have to be mad, who himself chose the working class districts in the North and East of Berlin for a barricade fight. *[Does that mean that in the future the street fight will play no further role? Certainly not; it only means that the conditions since 1848 have become far more unfavourable for civil fights, far more favourable for the military. A future street fight can therefore only be victorious when this unfavourable situation is compensated by other factors... (Italics in brackets by Engels)]*²¹

In this case there is as yet no scientific analysis of the days and nights on College Street, the clashes and skirmishes, mobilizations and the street battles, the defeats, deaths, and the legacy. College Street along with the Presidency College of the sixties became a myth.

And yet the purpose of this note has not been to set up two contrasting ideal categories of political occupy and social occupy as two parallel models of political mobilization and social mobilization - one that happened in the sixties and one that has happened in the beginning of this decade. In real life the political and the social have meshed with each other on various occasions and in varying degrees. Perhaps, the political nature of the mobilization on College Street was too much;²² a little more attention to the social dimensions of spatial occupation would have made occupation of College Street more durable. Equally perhaps greater attention to the political will lend greater solidity and focus to the social mobilizations that found an ideal expression in Occupy Wall Street.

With regard to the experience of College Street we can say at least this much: occupations like these and experiences of different kinds of friendships along with practices of an alternative kind of public ethics marking these occupations suggest a history not to be found in a standard political text book. It will be a history of techniques of mobilization, action, deliberation, and birth of a collective that perhaps perished with the death of the insurgency or perhaps lived on in the lives of some organizations, forums, and platforms, which were all rooted in the contentious politics of the time. They impacted on postcolonial polity, reinforced the notion of popular politics, brought forth the idea of radical democracy, and made the right to rebel to be acknowledged for a long time to

come as the only real historical right in democracy. Seen in this light, occupation suggests an alternative history that will force us to retrieve the silenced moments that lay behind the roar of bourgeois power. Today, as popular politics spreads across the country, this work of broadening the narrative of democracy and breaking down the intellectual orthodoxy of the story of democracy has never been so urgent.

Notes

¹On the origin of *gherao* movement in India, see Sugata Dasgupta, Ronen K. Bhattacharjee, and Surendra Vikram Singh, *The Great Gherao of 1969* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1974), p. 3, n 1; Dasgupta and others also bring to light the contribution of Ram Manohar Lohia in inventing the form, “*ghera dalo*” in the wake of the anti-famine agitation in Palamau, Bihar, in 1958 – p. 4, n 2. I am grateful to V. Ramaswamy for drawing my attention to this study.

²For details of these prison revolts and killings of prisoners, see *Ebong Jalarka*, special issue on *Jail Bidroha*, Volume 14 (3-4), October 2011-March 2012

³Dipananjan Ray Chaudhury, “Chatro-Andolon O Presidency College”, in *Sattar Dashak*, ed. Anil Acharya, Volume III, *Shat-Shattarer Chatra Andolan*, (reprint, Kolkata: Anushtup, 2012), pp. 131-158;

Kaushik Bandopadhyay, “Shat Dashaker Chatro Andolon Proshonghe” in *Sattar Dashak*, ed. Anil Acharya, Volume III, *Shat-Shattarer Chatra Andolan*, (reprint, Kolkata: Anushtup, 2012), pp. 201- 228.

⁴On this history, see for instance, Shyamal Chakrabarty, *Shat Shottorer Chatra Andolan* (Kolkata: National Book Agency, 2011). Chakrabarty’s account though one sided and extremely critical of the radical students and youth movement yet throws light on various aspects of student movement in fifties till the mid-sixties and the presence and spread of the movement in the districts. For him the guidance of the parliamentary Marxist leadership (the CPI-M) was crucial for the organized movement. Therefore he is at a loss to explain why the history he was presenting led to occupy in the sixties. He failed to understand how a legacy is formed and the inner dynamics of a legacy. In Chakrabarty’s account the events and activities of occupation of College Street were symbols of extremism and anarchism. See in particular his analysis of the Presidency College movement – pp. 285-308

⁵On farmers’ occupation see D.N. Dhanagare, *Populism and Power: Farmers’ Movement in Western India, 1984-2014* (London: Routledge, 2016)

⁶Prafulla Chakraborty, *Kanoria Jute Mill-e Noer Dashake Shramik Andolon er Udbhab O Kromobikash*, Fourth Jayanta Dasgupta Memorial Lecture (in Bengali, Kolkata: Calcutta Research Group, 2015)

⁷Irem Inceoglu writes of these features in “The Gezi Resistance and Its Aftermath: A Radical Democratic Opportunity?”, *Soundings* 57, *Eurozine*, 17 September, 2014 - <http://www.eurozine.com/the-gezi-resistance-and-its-aftermath/> (accessed on 24 May 2017)

⁸Nilufer Gole, “Gezi: Anatomy of a Public Square Movement”, *Insight Turkey*, Volume 15 (3, pp. 7-14), Summer 2013, P. 13, also available at - http://file.insightturkey.com/Files/Pdf/it15_03_2013_gole.pdf (accessed on 27 May 2017)

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 7

¹⁰Joshua Clover, “Pop and Circumstance”, *The Nation*, 21 April 2014, p. 34

¹¹“Mutiny on Beadon Street”, *The Statesman*, 29 August 1965; *Kalokwas* a play about the sailors’ mutiny in the Royal Indian Navy in 1946

¹²On occupation of the plant in course of the Maruti workers’ struggle, see Mithilesh Kumar and R. Samaddar, “Autonomy in India: Tactical and Strategic Considerations on the New Wave of Workers’ Struggles”, *Viewpoint*, January 2017 - <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/01/23/autonomy-in-india-tactical-and-strategic-considerations-on-the-new-wave-of-workers-struggles/> (accessed on 21 May 2017)

¹³On Marichjhanpi massacre there is now a considerable amount of literature. See for instance, Ross Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhanpi Massacre”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 58 (1), February 1999, pp. 104-125; Anu Jalais, “Dwelling on Marichjhanpi”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 40 (17), 23 April 2005, pp. 1757-1762; also “Massacre in Marichjhanpi”,

Letters to the Editor (response to Asok Mitra), *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 June 2005; Sukharanjan Sengupta, *Marichjhanpi Beyond and Within* (Kolkata: Frontpage, 2010); in Bengali - Madhumay Pal, *Marichjhanpi: ChinnaDesh, ChinnaItibash* (Kolkata: Gangchil, 2009); Jagadish Chandra Mandal, *NaishobderAntorale: Marichjhanpi* (Kolkata: Sujan Publications, 2002)

¹⁴ Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, The Spirit, and the Promises of Occupy Wall Street* (New York: HarperCollins, It Books, 2012), p. 43

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109

¹⁶ *The Great Gberao of 1969*; particularly chapter 4, pp. 85-126

¹⁷ Some of accounts on that time tell us of the spirit of dialogues among the radical activists. Besides the three volumes of *Sattar Dashak* (n. 2), see for instance, Alope Mukherjee, “Shat Sattar Dashaker Sandhikkhane B.E. Colleger Chatra Andolan: Kichu Katha”, *Ebong Jalarka*, Volume 17 (1-2), April 2014-September 2014), pp. 194-214; Kaushik Banerjee, “Katachenrai Barbar: Naxalbari, Charu Mazumder”, Parts I and II, *Ebong Jalarka*, Volume 16 (3-4), October 2013-March 2014), pp. 219-244 and *Ebong Jalarka*, Volume 17 (1-2), April 2014-September 2014), pp. 250-284)

¹⁸ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 165

¹⁹ H. Lefebvre *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Production* (London: Alison and Busby, London, 1976), p. 36

²⁰ R. Zibechi, *Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2012)

²¹ “Introduction” by Frederick Engels to Karl Marx, *Class Struggles in France* (1850), 1895 - <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/intro.htm> (accessed on 14 May 2017)

²² Fifty years later, in 2017, when the government of West Bengal proposed banning protests and processions on College Street on the ground that these hampered the day to day academic functioning of the colleges and the university there, many of the participants of the unrest in 1967 recalled the days of the tumultuous time. One erstwhile student leader said explicitly that those were the days of the Occupy. From burning trams against tram fare rise to resisting police onslaught against a students’ strike, to erecting a barricade with hundreds of blackboards pulled down from the university, jamming College Street with the demand to release political prisoners, to preventing Robert McNamara from arriving in the Governor’s House on road - these were, they said, acts of occupation. – See the report, “Boma-Barud-Pratibader Itihas College Streeter”, *Ei Shomoy*, 5 June 2017, p. 3

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