The Occupy Buffer Zone Movement: Radicalism and Sovereignty in Cyprus

Murat Erdal Ilican*

Abstract

As a response to the call of the global Occupy Movement in 2011, a number of people occupied the Cypriot no-man's land in the UN-controlled Buffer Zone of the capital Nicosia, a space that has historically divided the two ethnic communities, in the old part of town since the late 1950s. The re-insertion of human life on the border, in the midst of derelict buildings, barbed wire and under the watchful eyes of contesting sovereignties came under scrutiny and was contested by various actors in 2011 and 2012. The article is an ethnographic study of the Occupy Buffer Zone (OBZ) movement, which explores these contestations. It traces the development of OBZ from a small anti-authoritarian group to a movement that momentarily gained the support of various anti-establishment and anti-capitalist groups and individuals and its eventual dissolution after a violent police raid. In doing so it shows how a space for alternative politics was opened up, as well as the limits that claim to space hit upon.

Keywords: Occupy movement, Cyprus, Buffer Zone, resistance, sovereignty, animal-human, anti-authoritarianism, anarchists, property

Introduction

Writing about the Occupy movement in Cyprus, known as Occupy Buffer Zone (OBZ) is a complex task for a number of reasons: the most important of these being that my association with it did not develop out of a preformed academic interest. I became involved in the movement as a member of an anti-authoritarian group that found itself at the centre of OBZ's development. At the same time, as a student of property rights and sovereignty in Cyprus I could not help but think critically about the struggles and negotiations that unfolded around OBZ during the eight months of its survival, from October 2011 to May 2012. Often, in previous studies, I found myself 'seeing like a state' (Scott, 1998), that is to say, thinking about the aims of particular state policies and trying to understand the means through which they have been pursued in the context of Cypriot 'modernisation' and the conflicts that it entailed. This meant, for example, deciphering the

* I would like to thank all OBZ members with whom I shared a small chunk of my life for a meaningful journey, an experience through which I feel not only privileged, but also wiser. A debt to Peter Loizos is ever present for inducing my interest in anthropology.

classifications of OBZ along ethnic, class, gender, and other structures of division which members of the movement strove to dispense with. Being perceived as a 'marginal'[1] in many instances during my time spent in Cyprus (living between the two sides and perceived as an outsider in both societies) I did share with other OBZ members, the critique of the system that produces such marginalities. It is from this place, uncomfortable at points, but 'homely' in others, and most often exciting, that I became a participant researcher at OBZ.

I lived with OBZ activists from October 2011 and shared their plans and visions on how to move on within the movement and beyond it. I was certainly at the margin of both societies (north and south of the Green Line) but I often felt 'at home' in OBZ. Still, I always returned to another home to sleep, rest, and shower (the same as many other OBZ participants). Thus, at the point of writing, my engagement with OBZ became fraught with the dilemma that anthropologists recognise so well: practicing ethnography through cultural immersion while maintaining some distance in order to critically reflect on that practice. In my case, the lack of a clearly-defined 'participant observer' identity from the outset, exacerbated that dilemma. In fact, I aim to argue that this is what the main issue related to OBZ is: dealing with the problem of identity, when 'identity' is seen as a misnomer from the start.

Writing about OBZ is also permeated by a power dynamic in the sense that it carries the weight of creating knowledge about a movement whose history is too recent and academic debate around it has yet to be formed. It means that the contours of questions to be probed regarding OBZ have not solidified. 'Explaining' OBZ is not a set task in relation to responding to questions like 'what did OBZ mean for Cypriot society?', 'who did OBZ represent?', or 'does OBZ belong to the past?' It also means questioning the structures that give rise to such 'set' questions and the politics of 'situating' OBZ within the logics of state, of academia, and of liberal norms.

The violent attack by the police anti-terrorist squad of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) which is alleged to have signified the end of OBZ lies at the extreme of such attempts to situate the movement. I perceive this violence to be an indication of the political priorities of ruling authorities, not only in the RoC, but also in the Buffer Zone (i.e. the United Nations that allowed

1 Marginality is a complex and multi-faced phenomenon that implies variables of time, context, and position, which make up the dialectics of subjectivity and objectivity. In Cyprus, such variables are loaded with historic, cultural, economic, and political discourses, embedded in the social structures that are upheld as 'social norms'. These 'norms' are mostly over-determined by a discourse of difference that separates people on the basis of ethnicity and attaches ethical orientations of 'right' and 'wrong' to this understanding. This in turn affects the ways in which gender, class, and even space and time, are understood. In these terms, my 'marginality' is a factor of being a Turkish-Cypriot male, living on the wrong side of the divide – thus, I may be crossing the border as a 'Turkish-Cypriot' pedestrian, or a 'Greek-Cypriot' car driver. My education in 'elite' academic institutions abroad has also rendered me an 'outsider' of sorts, as well as nurturing a critical 'insider' perspective. It is this critical marginality exposed on a daily basis that makes me particularly aware and empathetic to other forms of marginalities imposed on other people, which ultimately fostered the particular alliances outlined here.

the raid to happen), and the ridiculously 'air-quoted' (Scheper-Hughes, 2007, p. 190) 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)', which seemingly had been informed of the attack. Equally, the subsequent lack of general support and response by the public is indicative to me of how OBZ managed not only to tease the establishments, but also played with liberal sensitivities regarding cleanliness and the propriety of not having 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 2002 [1966]). Such perceptions of cleanliness were made apparent in media reports about OBZ through the suggestion of drug use, sex, political naivety, childishness and mental deviance. Following the police raid, these associations were used to delegitimise OBZ in the eyes of the wider public, however many of them pre-existed this event and were apparent to greater or lesser extents in the reactions of many sections of society that came into contact with OBZ throughout its lifetime. These people ranged from well-dressed passers-by who looked down upon OBZ members, to officials who failed to negotiate with them, and even intellectuals who attempted to 'explain' the reasons for the movement's deviance, yet frequently taking that 'deviance' at face value. With this in mind, writing about this topic is a radical task because the meaning of OBZ exposes skeletons of conservativism in the Cypriot political closet.

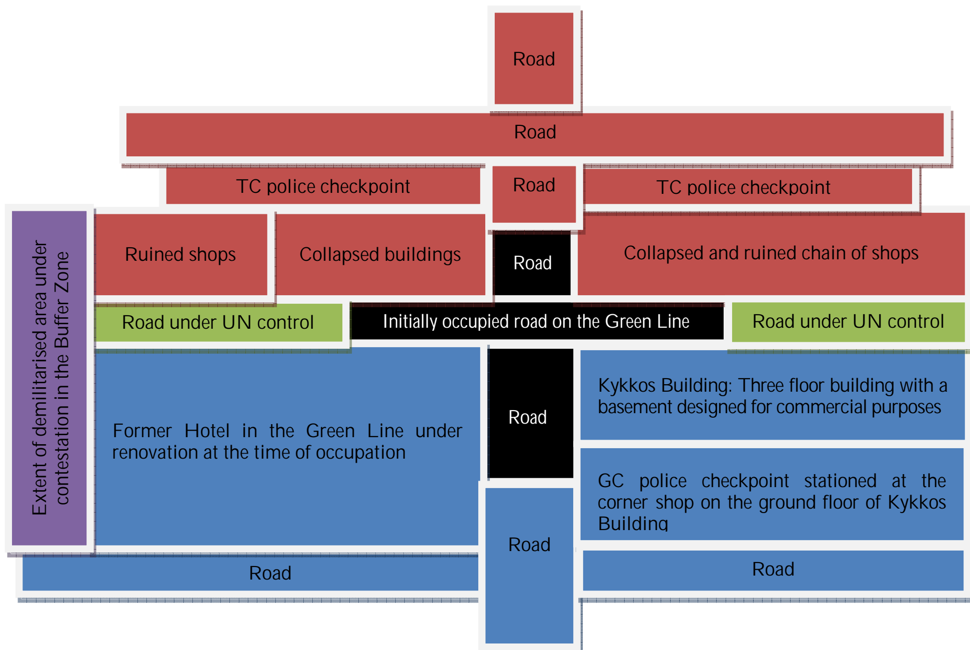
Crossings: Sovereignty and the Contestation of OBZ Space

The story of OBZ begins, as its name suggests, within the space of the Buffer Zone. The tents set up by the Cyprus Occupy movement were pitched along Kykkos road which was renamed by the OBZ movement as 'No Borders Street'. The street lies in the space known as the Ledra Street or Lokmacı crossing point, a 50 metre-long stretch of road between the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot checkpoints, under the authority of the UN. This point, in the heart of the old town of the divided capital of Nicosia, was opened to crossers north and south of the dividing Green Line in 2008, five years after the first crossing point at Ledra Palace opened in 2003. On that April morning of 2008, an opening ceremony attended by UN, EU and other local officials celebrated the occasion as a step further towards the island's unification. The optimism of this message, however, was quickly dampened by the temporary closure of the checkpoints on the same evening because of disputes over the precise extent of each authority's jurisdiction in that space. This 'scandalous' dispute was telling of the postcolonial power struggles over legitimacy and sovereignty that thrive in Cyprus and of the significance of this particular part of the Buffer Zone in them.[2] These struggles are what OBZ inherited and tried to build on by claiming its own legitimacy in this marginal but important location under the aegis of 'performing' sovereignty. This performance set it apart from other local movements, as well as Occupy movements elsewhere.

2 On the political import of the notion of 'scandal' and its relationship to the colonial arrangements of sovereignty see Dirks (2006). See also Krasner (1999) and Teschke (2003) who explore aspects of this in relation to sovereignty under the concepts of 'hypocrisy' and 'myth' respectively.

In the year 2008, the Ledra Street/Lokmacı crossing opened. That same year, Lehman Brothers collapsed, precipitating events around the global economic crisis that led to the appearance of the first Occupy movement in Wall Street, New York. These twin events shaped the way in which OBZ emerged at the interstices between global and local dynamics. Hence, OBZ was a movement intervening in 'glocal' politics (Swyngedouw, 1997; Swyngedouw and Kaika, 2003). It did this by appropriating the historic symbolisms of the space it occupied in the frame of global concerns. So, the movement's power stemmed from its strategic geographical location and in its inherent refusal to be identified solely through local issues. The suitability of the space of the Buffer Zone as a stage for protest was contested. Some argued that the location was a liability and that political fights should be conducted from within the centre of the system rather than on the periphery, the border and the margins. In locating itself in the Buffer Zone, OBZ also contested some of the liberal premises of the bi-communal movement: premises which have tied the concept of 'peace' in Cyprus to the coexistence of two communities, positioned at opposite sides of the dividing Green Line. The way in which OBZ conducted peace through the prism of wider concerns united not only Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots but also people of other nationalities around issues that prioritised multiplicity, flexibility, and inclusiveness.

Figure 1: Map of the OBZ Space (produced by the author)



Ledra Street/Lokmacı crossing is an asphalted road junction inside the Green Line, surrounded by derelict buildings, some of which were being given a facelift by OBZ while the movement was there (see figure 1). These buildings, sitting at the heart of what was once the richest commercial road in old Nicosia, had been turned into military defence and attack structures since the 1960s. And, since the installation of the UN on the island in 1964, and especially after the demarcation of the ceasefire line in 1974, the legal status of the area has been uncertain. The extent of UN control, or indeed control of the space by the authorities, north and south, has remained disputed.[3] This was advantageous for OBZ as the existence of multiple or contested sovereignties also meant the absence of sovereignty. In Schmittian terms, a sovereign is 'he who decides on the exception' (Schmitt, 2005, p. 5; also see Agamben, 2005). Indeed, as this strip of road was judged an exceptional space, it was often the site of disputed decisions that could not be implemented. In the life of the OBZ movement this indecision often gave space for OBZ to make its own decisions (see below). In this context, OBZ provided the space for individuals to step out from particular political configurations, predicated on the assumption that states are ultimate sovereigns over (and thus owners of) their citizens. OBZ members were, in a sense, 'defectors' from their societies, seeking refuge from the 'boredom' (see Toohey, 2011) of deterministic and highly structured social norms, which in their view left them with little prospects. This boredom, it could be argued, was in fact 'profound' enough to effect the radical action that OBZ undertook (Agamben, 2004, pp. 63–70).

Prior to the establishment of OBZ as a movement, a radical group known as 'the Manolis/Phaneromeni crowd' had already been active in the old town. They congregated in the square outside Phaneromeni Church, which they referred to as 'Manolis' after a tree they had named. The group included students, academics, artists, activists and others, who espoused critical views on the systems of governance in Cyprus. Ideologically, these views generally ranged from the marginal left to anti-capitalist and anarchist. This group organised events and festivals in the area, which it established as its meeting point, particularly on weekend evenings.

After 2010, these activities became increasingly politicised as public discourse began to emerge around the gentrification of the old town. Because of this, the group itself were cast as marginal and threatening towards the development of the old town as a liberal consumerist space. There were a number of instances when extreme right-wing groups even staged protests against their existence in the space and the group found itself defending its territory against opposition marches. At one point the group sought to expand its territory by rehabilitating an empty plot and making it into a 'little park' (*parkoui* as it came to be known). On still other occasions, the group staged street parades through the centre of the old town and beyond. It was on one such occasion – the carnival parade in 2010 – when a group in fancy-dress pushed a makeshift music cart into the Buffer Zone and held an evening party joined by a large crowd of one hundred or more people. This was

3 See Christodoulidou (2008) on the legal disputes around the designation of the Buffer Zone; Constantinou and Richmond (2005), Constantinou (2008, 2010), and Erdal Ilican (2011) on the issue of sovereignty in Cyprus.

repeated at other times as well, establishing the Buffer Zone at Ledra Street Crossing as a destination for the next spatial expansion of the Manolis crowd. The opportunity to realise this goal came with the creation of Occupy movements around the world, seeking solidarity with Occupy Wall Street. In mid-October 2011, some members of the Manolis crowd, together with others, decided to occupy the Buffer Zone by meeting there on a weekly basis and soon after that, tents were pitched, marking the beginning of OBZ.

In the cold winter of 2011 the crossing was, by and large, used by Turkish-Cypriot workers and shoppers coming to the south plus occasional Greek-Cypriot and RoC citizens of other nationalities and tourists going to the north. Since its opening, the respective state authorities used the crossing point as yet another platform where 'sovereignty' can be exercised based on the nationalist script of ethnic antagonism. Faith in high-level talks that might provide a settlement to the Cyprus conflict had waned after the two pro-reconciliation leaders, Christofias and Talat, admitted that an agreement would be harder to reach than was first thought. With no prospect of a settlement, nationalist attitudes surged on both sides, and public discourse became insular and focused on the deteriorating internal socio-economic conditions. Consequently, news of newly-discovered natural gas reserves off the southern coast of Cyprus were, on the one hand exploited as a bone of contention within the frame of the Cyprus conflict, and the global economic crises on the other.

Meanwhile, as the Arab Spring gained momentum against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, scenes of rioting, civil disobedience, occupation and state-led violence were becoming staple news stories. Similar scenes were also projected from Greece and Spain, who were both in the grips of financial austerity. In this environment the OBZ crowd in the Buffer Zone gained a following from a variety of backgrounds including social classes, political orientations, education levels, ages, sexes, ethnicities and religions. What united them was a general discontent of the situation locally and globally, and their aspiration for change from the bottom up.

'Identity' as Misnomer

The first question that emerges in almost every context where OBZ has been, and still is discussed, is that of identity. What is OBZ? In a conservative, clientelistic society like Cyprus (see Faustmann, 2010; Egemen, 2006) ravaged by ideologies of nationalism and enmity shaped within a postcolonial cold war context (see Kızılyürek, 2002, 2005; Drousiotis, 2005, 2006, 2008), this is a crucial question for many. Was OBZ a left-wing or a right-wing group? Were members of OBZ communists, anarchists, bi-communalists or hippies? What was their manifesto? Neatly organised thoughts on paper that would help 'us' to make sense of 'them' is what many seemed to be asking for. Who are they? What ethnicity do they have? What is their faith? What is their sexual orientation? Are they homeless? Are they drug users? Are they dirty? To all these clichéd questions, OBZ members reacted by refusing to be identified. They chose instead to have no identity, no solid lines or no boxes of any kind but rather to promote the idea that identities are limited and exclusionary, and are essentially an artificial construction.

Figure 2: Photo of welcome banner at OBZ © Murat Erdal Ilican

Figure 3: Photo of sign put up after police raid against OBZ © Murat Erdal Ilican

The welcome banner of OBZ flying over the occupied street and facing the southern checkpoint bore the words '*Καλωσορίσατε Kıbrıs'a*', a bilingual welcome in Greek (*kalosorisate*, meaning 'welcome') and Turkish ('*Kıbrıs'a*', meaning 'to Cyprus'). Its reverse side, facing the northern checkpoint, stated the 'welcome' in Turkish and the phrase 'to Cyprus' in Greek: '*hoşgeldiniz στην Κύπρο*' (see figure 2). After the brutal police raid, which saw most of the slogans posted on every available corner of OBZ during its lifetime disappear, a single hand-written poster announced that 'Peace was here' (see figure 3). So, the identity that OBZ claimed was at best, 'Cyprus' and 'peace'. In the intervening period, the numerous slogans that covered walls, tents and glass windows, over time, explained repeatedly the problems associated with exclusivity, homogeneity and other such monolithic categorisations. Hence, if OBZ persistently rejected an identity of any sort, the most discussed question should be turned around so that it does not read: 'what is, or was the identity of OBZ?' but rather 'why did people perceive OBZ to be in need of an identity?' Put differently, 'why was it important in people's perceptions for OBZ to have an identity in order to be legitimate?'

In the postcolonial context of Cyprus, modernity has been attended by ideas relating to location and ordering (see for example, Satia, 2008; Mitchell, 1988; Legg, 2007; Given, 2002). If this ordering is not complete (as it is always shifting and changing), the sovereignty that bases its legitimacy on such ordering is bound to be constantly put in question. In turn, using various 'techniques of governance' (see Cohn, 1996), the state tries to establish its sovereignty through disciplining its subjects (see Foucault, 2007) into becoming a particular type of citizen within the frame of liberal economic democracy. One of the side effects of such systematic liberal disciplining is that public perceptions have come to consider as 'natural' even the most problematic political ordering on the island – namely its division. As a result the border is often taken for granted, and its presence is questioned only on the basis of nationalist, xenophobic, racist or masculinist assumptions. This explains why OBZ seemed to need an identity within this frame and it remains the main issue behind the simple, but hugely complicated question of its individuality. It also brought to a head the most fundamental ideological clash of the OBZ movement with social norms. In the context of post-war Cypriot polity of countless divisions, OBZ members decided to adopt no identity rather than be associated with any and they advanced the idea that it is the system alone (educational, legal and administrative) that forces individuals to be categorised. But in doing so individuals lose out on the many other things they can be or engage with simultaneously and on a non-exclusionary basis. It could therefore be claimed that the radicalisation of OBZ lay in the rejection of identity.

OBZ members represented a wide range of 'identities' and it is on the basis of this that they resisted individual identification as well as an identity for the movement as a whole. The denunciation of this went hand-in-hand with the rejection of hierarchy within the OBZ movement. In their engagement with OBZ, the authorities frequently requested to meet with a leader: the lack of one was seen as a structural and fundamental problem. At one point a UN

military representative asked: 'How could you go anywhere without a leader?' At other times local authorities questioned how they could handle a headless movement which was reaching a critical mass and keeping itself alive on an important border crossing. People were also surprised, not so much by the lack of leadership and structure issues, but by the 'craziness' (*delilik*, which also implies 'bravery' in Turkish) of sustaining a struggle against such fundamental social values. 'How can you live in the street?' OBZ members were asked, particularly as this street was the symbol of division, at the heart of Nicosia where such acts might lead to serious personal or bodily harm. Contestation for sovereignty in this small space was certainly unsafe, and danger would become evident as the movement developed.

The First Phase of OBZ: Form and Content

OBZ shared a vision of peace, equality and an equitable distribution of resources. This is mirrored in the only text that the group agreed on, following two months of deliberation and discussion. The text comprising of four points is meant to be non-exhaustive and open to additions under the salutary heading: 'Greetings from the Buffer Zone: At the End/Beginning and in Between Ledra Street/Lokmacı Buffer Zone which has been under occupation for two months'. It emphasises space and location as the primary claims of OBZ. The first point in this document deals with confiscation and the redistribution of land from 'the state, the church and immense land owners' to the public for housing usage as well as reforestation, organic agriculture, renewable energy infrastructures and other public utilities. The second point stresses 'the right to own a home [as] a human right and a biological need. Every person should be allocated a home ... no-one need[s] ten houses'. The third point calls for demilitarisation and an end to policing as a key feature of the state, together with free and unbiased education, and free medical care. The last point is a declaration that '[w]e are against racism, sexism, and any ideology that transforms man into an object. Every immigrant or refugee is welcome on the island, provided they are prepared to contribute'. At the end of the declaration there is an injunction written in capital letters reading 'ANY SOLUTION OF THE CYPRUS PROBLEM [IS] TO BE BASED ON THESE PARAMETERS'.

Apart from this text, OBZ used a number of other venues to publicise its commitments. The use of mobile phones, internet and social media – utilising both 'northern' and 'southern' providers – helped OBZ communicate with the wider world in an inexpensive and efficient way. Utilising these relatively new communication channels alongside more traditional ones, OBZ members made use of humour to encourage critical questioning of both the state and the subjects it creates. With numerous slogans, artwork, performances and other activities (including musical evenings, film screenings, parties and demonstrations), OBZ targeted the ruling elite, the global and local capitalist systems, the military and police, and the political and economic power centres such as the Church and the media (see images in figure 4).

Figure 4: Photographs of OBZ creations using humour to make political statements © Murat Erdal Ilican

Initially, the authorities did not react vociferously to the occupation of the Ledra Street crossing, perhaps believing that the winter cold would eventually drive people away from the street and back to their homes. Often, during those early days, police, other officials and state agents, asked, 'don't you guys have a place to stay, a home, a family, a job?' In braving the cold weather, OBZ members capitalised on their previous experiences of camping outside and created separate tent zones as lounge and kitchen areas, whilst keeping in mind a passage for civilians who they viewed as potential allies. Despite the space being under the watchful eye of the police, military, and the UN through cameras and other forms of surveillance, the camp soon began to grow and OBZ quickly learnt to identify agents monitoring them.

It became obvious rather quickly that the coexistence of passers-by, authorities, and OBZ members in this limited space required some basic rules. To apply rules in a space with no law and amidst a law-resilient crowd of people is, I believe, the most difficult compromise that OBZ members had to make. The old adage of who sets the rules, where, when, how and who enforces and obeys them, presented a challenge for OBZ. One advantage that OBZ gained was a clean space where law seemed to be suspended, thus offering the chance to experiment with the creation of a model society.

Yet, it should be said that contrary to common views, OBZ was neither 'lawless', nor staked on the abolition of all law. Its ideology was rather driven by the vision of creating rules in common, and developed for reasons that were clear to everyone and agreed unanimously. Each OBZ member had the power to veto and the right to express their views on any issue. The inefficiency

of this system and the extremes to which it was taken by OBZ in the name of inclusivity became obvious with time, as shown in cases of Occupy movements elsewhere. A jovial comment among some OBZ members whenever an imminent but minor dilemma was faced is: 'we should put it up for discussion at the General Assembly!' or 'let's put it on Facebook!' (where supporters would also post comments and partake in long electronic discussions). The differentiation between matters of a practical nature and those of political importance was not always obvious, but slowly they began to emerge.

In the first phase of occupation, the main focus was on the meetings, discussions, events and activities. They were all open to the public. General Meetings, where much of the planning took place and the management and representation of OBZ discussed, attracted a large number of OBZ supporters. As in other Occupy movements, these Assemblies and other meetings were like a laboratory of social experimentation. In the meantime, the contestation of OBZ's space and legitimacy ensued through impromptu negotiations between OBZ members and the authorities.

One such occasion was the first written exchange with the UN. An ultimatum with no signature or name, but stamped with UN insignia, was presented to OBZ on 25 November 2011. It stated the requirement to obtain permission to stage a 'bi-communal event or activity' in the Buffer Zone. The immediate response from OBZ was to question the ethnic lens under which any activity related to 'peace' is immediately interpreted as 'bi-communal'. Hence, OBZ replied to state that 'we are not a bi-communal movement or activity, but a peaceful, yet occupying multicultural force'. Given this response and the demand of the OBZ members for an immediate demilitarisation and reunification of the island, which is compatible with UN discourse, the UN, at least in the beginning, chose not to pursue confrontation. Instead, the UN kept its distance, but UNFICYP personnel frequently visited the site to intimidate, record, and photograph OBZ members and the space.

Early one morning an incident took place when a young, low-ranking soldier attempted an inspection by marching in front of the tents where people were sleeping. On occasions prior to this, journalists and secret police had also walked by this 'private' area of OBZ under the pretext of wanting to photograph slogans for newspaper publication, however dogs belonging to OBZ members attacked the 'intruders' and chased them away. This happened again in the case of the UN soldier who took refuge in the Greek-Cypriot police station and called the RoC and UN authorities' attention to 'the dog problem in the Buffer Zone'. In earlier episodes, intruders had similarly run away shouting, 'control your bloody dogs'. Dogs and other animals gradually became an important aspect of OBZ, not only as defenders of the territory, but as a prism through which OBZ was viewed.

Hygiene was the key discourse used by the authorities to attack OBZ. The dogs and their excrement were cast as a major concern when the attitude of confrontation took on a humanitarian tone (OBZ should be dismantled because it endangered the health of its own members). In their attempt to resolve the issue OBZ members opened up a passage behind the tents that led into a derelict building in the demilitarised Buffer Zone on the Turkish-Cypriot side.

This new space, containing the only ground soil accessible to OBZ members, was then designated as a place where dogs could defecate and humans could urinate, but in spite of this the 'animals and their discharge' would continue to be one of the crucial points around which many of the internal and external power struggles of OBZ would be conducted. In fact, the only physical fight that took place amongst members of the OBZ movement was over the issue of 'dog shit'. This all points to the significant role that dogs and other animals played in the development of the movement: spatially in spurring the first expansion, and socially by impacting on relations between OBZ and outsiders as well as within the group. It can be asserted that there was also an ontological role in the structuring of OBZ dynamics along the human-animal nexus, so that 'time' and 'boredom' became conditions for the possibility of action.

Time, at Ledra Crossing, was about a series of performances (aiming at communication), tests (where the aims were to understand) and negotiations (aiming at accommodating others). These scenarios became part and parcel of the movement's daily struggle for survival on the street. OBZ members during their prolonged stay at the Buffer Zone frequently compared themselves to caged animals. They sensed that although they were acting out their freedom in the occupied space, they were, at the same time, very aware of the enclosure they were in and the perils that it held. These feelings were also reinforced by the very space of the Buffer Zone which was similar to a cage, guarded on all fronts. As Agamben says:

> '*In becoming bored, Dasein* [Existence] *is delivered over* (ausgeliefert) *to something* [or, is at the mercy of something] *that refuses itself, exactly as the animal, in its captivation, is exposed* (hinausgesetzt) *in something unrevealed*' (Agamben, 2004, p. 65 – square brackets added).

Boredom, it seems, functions in a similar way in OBZ, showing the border between human and animal as it blurs. Whilst OBZ members advocated that there is little difference between humans and animals, passers-by and authorities appeared to single out critically the animals as a way of dehumanizing OBZ protesters.

In this space, the role of animals and humans did not differ much; ultimately they were occupiers on guard, living in the street. In reality, as the animals did not have any concept of man-made militarised and guarded borders they appeared as free as OBZ members would prefer to be. On the human side, however, things were different. The profound 'boredom' that OBZ members experienced within their own societies had led each one of them to exit that society and search for openness in the Buffer Zone, only to face the realisation that even this type of openness is itself confined. It provided no new space from which to exit other than the one-way-street back to the rejected society. Yet there was hope in change as well, and the actions and performances of OBZ were influential in helping to conceptualise new inclusive and open spaces, implying a determination to stay and continue the occupation struggle. This was an important aspect of OBZ's development as it moved into the next phase.

Second Phase: Occupation as an Ethical Issue

Almost from the start one issue that divided OBZ members was the possible expansion of the camp with use of the surrounding space in the Buffer Zone. While one group considered expansion as necessary, either through the arrival of more people or to satisfy a genuine need of the group, others advocated 'no expansion in order not to risk [losing] what we already have'. Nonetheless, for some, expansion seemed a matter of survival, claiming that 'we either expand or die'. In this sense, the expansion into a nearby derelict building was a necessity aimed at relieving the pressure of constantly cleaning up excrement after the dogs. Other projects were planned for the new area like the creation of a vegetable garden plus keeping chickens there (for eggs only) when the weather became warmer. Initially, the Turkish military limited their involvement to the monitoring of this expansion.

Moreover, the new space became a test tool for OBZ members to assess visitors' reactions. When visitors arrived and asked whether there was a public toilet, they were given two options: either use the municipality toilet which meant crossing through the Greek-Cypriot checkpoint, or use the ruins, which technically lay 'on the Turkish side' behind an opening in the razor wires. The most frequent reaction was initial confusion, which amused OBZ members. To OBZ, the first option signalled conformity (prioritisation of cleanliness), while the second indicated a more relaxed, perhaps pragmatic, or even nationalist approach ('pissing on the Turkish side').

The relaxed position of the Turkish military to the expansion soon changed when OBZ members decided to construct a banner facing the northern checkpoint which expressed solidarity with an imprisoned Turkish-Cypriot blogger who had written of torture in the Turkish army. The UN removed the banner almost immediately and during the same night they supervised the Turkish military's confiscation of OBZ's generator, which had been sited next to the ruins where OBZ had expanded. As mentioned previously, although, the ruins were technically positioned in the Turkish side, entry into the space by the military was formally prohibited as it was deemed an infringement on UN jurisdiction. So, the Turkish military's confiscation of OBZ's generator, in addition to sealing off the entry point into 'their space' took place under the supervision of the UN and in front of the RoC's secret police. This was the first concerted and open attack on the OBZ group by the sovereign(s) of the Buffer Zone. In response, OBZ produced a second banner, reading, 'UN supports torture in the Turkish Army', and placed it opposite the UN's entry point to the area. Opposite the Turkish checkpoint, OBZ then raised a second banner that read, 'There is no torture in the Turkish army ...?' What the group learned from this experience is that whilst each sovereign unilaterally acted dismissively of OBZ so as not to bestow importance on the movement and elevate it to the level of an interlocutor, unilaterally they each had no qualms about sabotaging OBZ in their own small ways.

The next stage of expansion is when the struggle for space reached its peak and the show of sovereignty turned violent. The expansion took place on a cold rainy night when some OBZ members broke into an empty corner shop of the Kykkos Building and slept in it for warmth.

Soon afterwards, it was cleaned up and a decision was taken to use it as 'the people's coffee shop'. Discussions continued in the rain the next day on the subject of rules governing the only dry public space, and a no smoking policy was adopted. This decision led to a further occupation: this time it was the shop next to it where smoking was allowed. In time this new larger space was used as an activity centre (figure 5).

Figure 5: Photos of OBZ's Activity Centre © Murat Erdal Ilican

At that point OBZ received a second letter from the UN requesting people 'to vacate the area immediately'. The reasons given stated that 'the procedures to be followed of events in the Buffer Zone' had not been followed (notably no reference to bi-communalism was made this time); that the renovation of 'works [to the buildings around the camp site] are being seriously impeded'; that OBZ posed a 'public health hazard'; that it created a disturbance in a 'residential area' because of the 'noise' it made and from the 'smoke from fires' lit to provide warmth; that it caused 'discomfort for the children and elderly'; and that it attracted 'feral dogs'. The expansion with regard to 'at least

two vacant buildings in the area [where] fires [had been set] inside these buildings, contrary to regulation', was also emphasised but without referring to which specific regulations these were. OBZ publicly responded to this letter the same day, explaining that:

> 'our efforts to revitalise the Dead Zone create a fertile environment for producing culture and education "beyond borders". Here, new bonds and friendships can *flourish between people who are otherwise segregated*. We believe the reasons we are here matter a lot more in terms of the welfare of this island than the regulations the United Nations claim we violate' (OBZ, 13 January 2012 – emphasis in original).

Their response went on to dismantle the UN's claims by refuting that renovation was impeded, rejecting accusations of producing litter or disturbing the neighbours, claiming that the dogs belonged to them and were not 'feral'. Furthermore, it was pointed out that the occupation of empty buildings without authorisation from the UN was a political act. The emphasis on the 'feral' nature of the dogs, in light of the role they played in OBZ, was arguably a moral attack on OBZ and the 'humanity' it represented. The UN's dismissal of the dogs and of OBZ because of them, brings to mind Agamben: 'If in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhumane is produced by animalizing the human, here [in the machine of earlier times] the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the ape-man, the *enfant sauvage* or *Home Ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of animals in human form' (Agamben, 2004, p. 37).[4] The UN's reference to 'feral dogs' was therefore far from a simple statement of concern for hygiene. It was a political statement about how – dehumanised through their dogs – the OBZ movement needed to be delegitimised as a political agent in modern liberal discourse.

Indeed, liberal discourse affected the internal dynamics of OBZ too. This surfaced in a debate about the morality of expansion into a private building. By extending out from the street into the surrounding buildings brought OBZ face to face with the limits of inclusivity and unanimity. On the subject of increasing the group's space, OBZ members found themselves divided once more over a significant question of modernity; the issue of deciding what is private property. While one part of the group advocated expansion and wanted to claim the unused and derelict space in its totality for the movement to use in common, others objected that buildings were private property and should not be violated to avoid the risk of losing what OBZ had gained so far. In the end, by utilising the relevant articles of the only agreed common text, the 'radicals' of OBZ won the argument that there is no legitimacy for private property beyond what one needs for survival, and they occupied the upper floors of the Kykkos Building.

For a short period whilst the occupiers waited for possible reactions from the authorities, the entrance to the upper floors was covered by a cloth and disguised. In time, a door with a lock

4 For an interesting counter point on Agamben's 'anthropological machine', see Oliver (2007).

replaced the cloth but this controversial act created practical as well as theoretical difficulties. The practicalities related to inclusivity, and access was handled through the distribution of copied keys to any OBZ members upon demand by designated master key-holders whose job also included admitting people on request. This procedure was adhered to in the name of security to protect its members from the state, its agents, and others who may have desired to hurt OBZ. The idea proved futile since the door was almost always open, especially during daytime, and lost keys were constantly being handed in to OBZ by border police. Even then, the theoretical issues concerning the contradictory needs of inclusivity and access on one hand, and privacy and security on the other, was voiced in various heated debates in which the main point was defining the 'public-private dichotomy'. This refers to the western binary conceptualisation of property as being either privately or publicly owned without a clear-cut remedy to the inherent problems associated with the notions of what constitutes a private or public domain in addition to the rights, norms and behaviours associated with their use (see also Geuss, 2001). The debates in OBZ constantly revolved around the designation of particular spaces and activities, even labelling time as 'public' and 'private': what might be done where and when.

In the newly acquired space there were two upper floors arranged around a small courtyard and divided into commercial office spaces. The area had excellent scope not only for accommodating people but for other activities too; however it was full of military sand bags, razor wires, old newspapers, and rubbish. All of it was in need of some repair, though not structural work (figure 6). This new space was like entering a time warp: it was frozen in a violent past. The entire building had, in fact, been used as a military defence and attack structure by the Greek-Cypriot military post-1963 and up until the demilitarisation of the old city. Extensive cleaning, repair work and painting were necessary before the building could be made use of. By mounting a communal effort the space was cleaned up eventually and people began to move in and claim their own rooms. In other words, the right to a private space – in this case an individual room – was allocated on a first-come-first-served basis but it had required a considerable amount of labour in the form of cleaning, fixing and painting. In between these private spaces were bigger rooms designated as lounges, a kitchen, guest rooms, a music studio, a radio station, an art studio, and a coffee shop.

The building slowly became another valuable asset for OBZ. It meant that the movement was now able to survive the spring and the intense summer heat, which was more threatening than an unusually difficult winter. Additionally, the covered spaces could be used for specific functions, thus providing more venues to reach out to the public and avoid the cultural stigma attached to 'the streets'. The concept of dirt, as matter out of place, drove a wedge between some sections of society and OBZ, whose spreading fame cast it first and foremost as 'dirty' and 'out of place'. As cleaning was underway, the street was used for events and public interactions, which allowed for the renovation of the surrounding buildings as well as 'easing' the passage of crossers; a problem that the UN had complained about.

But with expansion, the vilification of OBZ took on another form. This time, rather than

Figure 6: Debris cleaned up from floors above activity centre © Murat Erdal Ilican

being branded as dirty losers and vagabonds occupying the streets, OBZ members were classified as sex and drug addicts, holding orgies in the building. In reality, OBZ members were busy cleaning and reclaiming dead spaces from the past and bringing them one by one into current use. Undeniably, OBZ members often drank beer, consumed other alcoholic drinks in public and shared cigarettes in private, but they also chased away people who tried to join them, seeking to sell drugs or use hard drugs. Sexual relations did develop between some OBZ members. Issues of legality and illegality, politics, and drugs, were discussed alongside the equal division of tasks and gender dynamics within the group. In such debates, the 'confusion' surfaced in relation to social policy 'where drugs were concerned – criminalising possession of cannabis, for example, but not alcohol or tobacco', which Mazower describes as a Europe-wide phenomenon (1998, p. 343). In this zone an 'alternative space' was being established which soon began to attract marginalised people from all walks of life. As a result, OBZ found itself confronting wider problems within Cypriot society as the OBZ movement was also perceived a safe haven for many locals who felt victimised by the established norms of the society – namely life, freedom, expression, family, religion, education, law, age, sex, gender, race, class, violence, military, authority and order.

Renewed energy came with every room that was being rehabilitated in the Kykkos Building. Countless labour hours were spent in this endeavour; cleaning, fixing, painting and removing dirt. The questions of legitimacy being levied at OBZ no longer centred around the concepts of home, family or job but on the legality of occupying a private property – in this case the Monastery of Kykkos, i.e. belonging to the Church. In other words it appears that OBZ, like other Occupation

movements, was 'accused of not respecting private property – but the Wall Street speculations that led to the crash of 2008 wiped out more hard-earned private property than anything the protestors would be able to achieve' (Žižek, 2012, pp. 82–83).

Third Phase: Forced Eviction and OBZ's Afterlife

With the arrival of spring, OBZ members began to open their windows and doors and utilise the overhanging balconies of the Kykkos building which protruded above the road that functioned as a passage connecting the two sides. Tourists and others stopped to take in the 'colour' of OBZ while walking between frosty-faced police encountered at the crossing points. At times orange juice was offered to the public on the ground floor while on many other occasions the sound of live music performances reached the street from the balconies. The expressions of passers-by would sometimes be supportive, sometimes reserved, yet at other times they were curious. Some brought food and others shared the contents of their shopping bags. Some left money while others offered equipment, chairs and so on. OBZ, not only survived the streets but had managed to expand and elevate itself above the streets metaphorically and literally: a radio station was due to begin its transmission, the building was almost clean from top to bottom and it was freshly painted. Also, water had been sourced by tapping into a pipeline nearby which meant that toilets were potentially usable and electricity was provided using a generator. In fact the building was about to be opened to the public at large. For instance, Scapula, a radical/progressive student youth club with premises in the building, was opening to the public on the night that the police raid took place.

On the night of 7 April 2012 the anti-terrorist unit of the special operations police squad, entered the building through a hole in the wall and over the roof attached to the Greek-Cypriot checkpoint proving the naivety of relying on a simple door lock to keep the 'state' out. Purpose trained, anti-terrorist police attacked OBZ members, beat them up, and arrested them at gunpoint after forcing them onto the roof of the building where they made them huddle on their knees in a circle for about an hour. Twenty-eight people were arrested and seven of them sustained serious injuries. The question 'why?' still lingers. Even though the raid was officially sanctioned because of suspicions of drug use, the police confiscated one gramme of marijuana and charged those arrested with 'illegal entry'. According to RoC law, 'illegal entry' on its own is not an offence without the intent to commit a crime (see also *Sunday Mail*, 2012). The Turkish-Cypriot charged with being in possession of one gramme of marijuana denied the charge and claimed that he was picked out randomly and beaten to confess possession (which he did not) once the police realised that he was Turkish Cypriot. A Greek Cypriot who refused to confirm the police's allegation and defended his Turkish-Cypriot friend was also beaten. There were suggestions that the raid might have been a practice run for the riot squad to polish their skills prior to possible attacks during the EU presidency which the RoC took up in June 2012. It was also thought that they might have wanted to clear the area in preparation for showcasing the division line during the presidency. What this appears to confirm is that OBZ had grown to the point where it was perceived to be more than a

'wacky' movement, and posed a substantial threat to the *status quo* of the Buffer Zone, perhaps also to the social order beyond it. In short, it had established its own sovereignty to the degree that the sovereign being threatened responded by utilising the ultimate weapon: the state's monopoly on violence.

The following day, the music on 'No Borders Street' was replaced by tension and crying. Dogs were separated from their owners and some were hurt. Although four chickens were missing and two were dead, the remaining seven were found alive. Doors, chairs and music equipment as well as expensive instruments were deliberately damaged. OBZ members with their bodies and souls broken, debated how they would carry on the life they had built over the past six months. With tears and anger in their eyes, OBZ members continued to remonstrate with various sovereign authorities who visited the site to warn them that unless they left immediately they would be met with more force than before. The police left and the OBZ members stayed. The coffee area on the ground floor, which had been locked by the police, was re-opened and some OBZ members moved back in as a last attempt to hold onto their space. It was an act which lasted for a further month, at the end of which OBZ disbanded completely. That final month was akin to a period of mourning and an attempt to find some degree of communal healing to ease the trauma inflicted by the RoC anti-terrorist squad. To this day, every individual OBZ member carries the scars of that attack mentally and physically.

The public's response to the raid was quite diverse. Comments from the recently elected right-wing Nicosia Mayor criticised the use of force, 'no matter where it comes from', but also added that the situation raised health and security issues associated with OBZ. It was suggested that 'the problem' would resolve itself when the area is revitalised, including transferring the bi-communal information office from Ledra Palace crossing to the Kykkos Building.[5] Nationalist media described the raid as necessary because it put an end to the abominable acts that the OBZ group had allegedly engaged in for the past six months, naming orgies, sex between adults and minors, and indiscriminate drug use (*ANT1* TV news, 2012). It also rationalised the raid on the basis that 'repeated calls for a peaceful withdrawal were not heeded' (*ibid*). The Turkish-Cypriot media joined the nationalist fervour by focusing on the brutality of the Greek-Cypriot police, for example, talk of 'extreme force' being used against a 'peace-loving bicommunal crowd' and detailing the hair pulling, gun-pointing at people, and breaking doors and windows (*Kibris*, 7 April 2012). The more liberal media condemned the violence of the attack, noting that it would not even excuse an operation against 'drug lords' (*Politis*, 10 April 2012) giving prominence to the message of the movement over the violence of the police raid (*Cyprus Mail*, 14 April 2012; *Sunday Mail*, 8 April 2012). Following the incident similar condemnations led to a large protest march through the

5 See *ANT1* TV News (2012), Όλα τα βίντεο των συμπλοκών στη Λήδρας [All the videos on the Ledra street clashes]. Available at [http://www.ant1iwo.com/kypros/2012/04/08/ola-ta-ninteo-twn-symplokwn-sth-lhdras-v/], accessed on 12 May 2013.

streets of central Nicosia. A well-known peace activist and musician composed a song about it which began with the lines 'For 1 gramme of cannabis/the police tried to/kill peace'.[6] The Bi-communal Teachers' Platform held a solidarity event in the space a few days after the raid.

Today, Ledra Street crossing is a 'revitalised' area with potted olive and jasmine trees running along it, dividing the lanes of crossers north-south and south-north (figure 7). The OBZ movement existed for over six months and was attended not only by progressive and radical Cypriots from various ethnicities, walks of life, ages, genders and from both sides of the divide, but also by people from elsewhere with similar visions and goals who had congregated within the space from different parts of the world. In this respect, OBZ was a unique phenomenon in the 'modern' history of protest in Cyprus and one of the most prolonged among other global occupation movements. With its noise, colour, smoke, humour, tolerance, desire for demilitarisation and peace, and last of all with its effective resistance to authority, discipline and power, OBZ set an example worthy of reconsideration the day after. As Žižek recently said '[Occupy] protests are the beginning, not the end. Their basic message is: the taboo has been broken, we do not live in the best possible world; we are allowed, obliged even, to think about the alternatives' (2012, p. 77).

Figure 7: Ledra Street crossing cleaned up after OBZ eviction © Murat Erdal Ilican

6 See Haji Mike and others (2012) on SoundCloud, 'For 1 Gramme of Cannabis the Police tried to Kill the Peace in Cyprus'. Available at [http://soundcloud.com/hajimike/for-1-gramme], accessed on 12 May 2013.

Conclusion

OBZ was neither a political party that needed to satisfy people with a specific political manifesto, nor was it an NGO with an agenda. OBZ was a movement that evolved through a group of people who felt the need to exert some sovereignty over a number of the most fundamental issues concerning their lives. OBZ could be viewed as an idea or 'desire', more than a 'thing' or concrete institution, for the creation of an alternative society and space where people can attain self-fulfilment within a more sustainable and fairer world. Along this line of thinking, one of the slogans created after the raid, declared that 'you cannot evict an idea'.

Returning to its identifiers of 'Cyprus' and 'peace', OBZ has set a precedent as regards thinking differently about both. By planting a criticism of the ethnic logic of 'the Cyprus conflict' including that of bi-communalism, it raised the stakes of peace activism. It connected peace activism with both anti-militarism and anti-capitalism. By adding militarism and police violence to the agenda, it highlighted the induced insecurities of divided societies in Cyprus. By claiming a marginal space (the Buffer Zone) as well as being at the margins of society itself, it elevated the level of negotiation between the 'marginals' and the state. It politicised 'marginality' as a relevant constituency within the peace movement and within Cypriot politics. It also consolidated the space of the old town, inclusive of the Buffer Zone, as a space of possible future protests, actions, and performances. The advance of gentrification, rather than the re-vitalisation which is going on in the area at the moment,[7] is a reminder that the battle continues.

The violence of the police in crushing OBZ did not – as coined by Foucault – subjectify members of the movement into docile individuals. Instead, it exposed, contrarily, the actual failure of the state to ensure that its political logic was internalised by everyone, and therefore it consolidated the now 'former' OBZ movement and its friends as individuals and collectivities that continue to resist it, either in public (utilising, in some instances, more radicalised practices such as littering and deliberately creating noise) or in private (conducting meetings and events in homes). What was considered a 'homely space' prior to OBZ is no longer there, but activities that were formerly public have now been pushed 'underground', while others are more visibly 'delinquent'. Thus, in relation to what disciplinary control should be about, it could be argued that violence has had the opposite effect. According to a Foucauldian perspective 'disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed. One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distribution, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation' (1977, p. 143). The breakup of OBZ has multiplied such bodies and spaces rather than contain them, possibly laying the foundation for new forms of protest.

7 This is not to homogenise the forms and extent of 'gentrification' throughout the old town, which is admittedly very differentiated – the Paphos Gate area to the west is still relatively impoverished, while the Famagusta area to the east is being renovated and is becoming a cultural centre, popular with young families: Ledra Street falls somewhere in the middle, with commercialisation driving gentrification policies.

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