

A Movement Without Mobility

Power, Political Space, and the Lincoln Left

Irruptions

2020

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We observed in our last piece that Lincoln does not have an organized “left” that is capable of productively directing the recent protests. It is not our intention to build one. Instead, the purpose of this blogpost is to provoke discussion regarding what resistance might look like in the city. We want to interrogate a few important questions: in what way and in what locations does power flow in Lincoln? Rather than attempting to “take space” in the halls of power, how can we imagine the disruption of power? First, before we can answer these questions, we must address the current strategies deployed by activists here.

The pattern is painfully familiar: a call to action, a sidewalk march, and finally a speech, given through a megaphone. Evidently, we are not the only people frustrated by this banal sequence of events. Do the police even bother to follow them at this point? More importantly, we have heard rumblings that Lincoln organizers are frustrated because their numbers have consistently declined since the beginning of the summer. “The movement isn’t over,” they shout into megaphones. Though our tone has been—and will continue to be—scathingly polemical, we would like to invite these young organizers to assess the situation and understand that their loss of energy is not merely due to a fickle public or lesser media attention. Rather, it is the political formation into which they have locked themselves (as we noted in our first critique, working with the police is another significant factor). Old activists have been stuck in this formation for years, and it appears the young activists are recapitulating the same mistake. The protest in Lincoln is most often organized around the space of the capitol building.

It is no surprise that the center spoke of Lincoln politics is the state capitol itself. It is the principal symbol of political power for the petit bourgeoisie, precisely because they are the class represented by it. The politicians who walk its halls during business hours still speak and legislate according to their values and desires: the home, the family, the nine to five job. Though the economy has long since abandoned this middle-class utopianism, activists are still interpellated by the beckoning call of socio-political normativity. Thus, every protest begins and, in the same moment, dies on the steps of the capitol.

What is at the heart of this problem is a critical misunderstanding of power and political space. We will begin addressing this misunderstanding by first discussing power and then we will turn to the question of political space.

The Force of Power

As we understand it, power is not an object. Rather, we are compelled by Michel Foucault’s formulation of power: “The exercise of power is not simply a relation between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others... Power exists only when it is put into action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures” (788). Foucault’s definition puts power into motion. It is not held. It functions. In an interview Foucault goes further to describe power as something operative rather than static:

[P]ower is nothing other than a certain modification, or the form, differing from time to time, of a series of clashes which constitute the social body, clashes of the political, economic type, etc. Power, then, is something like the stratification, the institutionalization, the definition of tactics, of implements and arms which are useful in all these clashes. (260)

The value of this definition for our purposes is that it situates power within the domain of struggle. Power is the agonistic or antagonistic relations that constitute the social body. It is the mechanism that produces the form a society takes. On the basis of this, it should be somewhat clearer what we mean when we say that one does not possess power as an object. Power is always in circulation. It passes through subjects and institutions as a productive, rather than a repressive, force. We might think of this form of power as creative destruction. Policing is perhaps the most obvious example that we can call to mind. The force of police attempts to establish particular forms of life. It works to identify and expel the undesirable from society, simultaneously constituting the delinquent via its expulsion and manufacturing the citizen-subject by establishing and enforcing the values and desires of the dominant class. Neither subjectivity exists without the other and the forces that determine them—in our case, policing.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that only one force or power relation generates the totality of the body politic. A multiplicity of power relations exist that produce and sustain subjects, institutions, forms of living, etc. These relations circulate within a matrix, passing from point to point, node to node, vector to vector.

That is also to say, power does not flow downwards from a sovereign and its political representations (state buildings, monuments, judges, civil servants, etc.). Since we have now alluded to sovereignty, we might say that the capitol building is a relic of that older sovereign mode of power. It may symbolize a state form that configured power vertically, like a finger being pressed upon the population. And yet, we could argue that the status of the capitol building may have always been an instrument that exercised the type of power we have been discussing, that is, an apparatus that produced a particular relation between classes and political subjects. But this conversation is beyond the scope of our present discussion. To return to the point at hand, we must understand that power, as we experience it in the present, is operational; it flows within a nexus of relations. In *To Our Friends, The Invisible Committee* desanctifies the ostensible halls of power, explicating a logistical form of power:

It's not to prevent the 'people' from 'taking power' that they are so fiercely kept from invading such places, but to prevent them from realizing that power no longer resides in the institutions. There are only deserted temples there, decommissioned fortresses, nothing but stage sets—real traps for revolutionaries. (82)

Here we are called to realize that if we were to rush the capitol steps and burst through the building's front doors, we would find ourselves gazing into emptiness. Power has escaped out the back door, and the activists have failed to notice. There is no interior, only exteriors,

only surfaces. It is no longer that the emperor is without clothes, but but that the clothes are without an emperor. Power is not contained. It moves, circulates, permeates, produces effects.

Last year, The Climate Strike protests provided us with another reminder that power is not fixed in place, not held by a person or in an institution. We were forced to listen to the same boring speeches, lectured to vote, and to upload selfies, hashtagged with the governor's name. We overheard others: "So now we take the streets?" Alas, after the selfie, everyone went home. There were whispers, people saying, "Let's just burst into the capitol," but we now know that it is a void space. Yet, it is precisely into this void that the activists in Lincoln would like to lead us (and we feel this is most likely the case in any small, non-organized city). If we continue to follow activists' abyssal march, we will never be able to understand or analyze power and its daily effects, nor will we have a plan to grow and build infrastructure for ourselves. The unorganized small town will, instead, float like a moth to the flames of local politics, co-optation, and incremental progress. We, ourselves, will perpetually circulate along the state's infrastructure, the fixed politico-economic space that subsumes our protest and sells it back to us on the internet.

Political Space and the City

Thus far, we have tried to provide a rudimentary sketch of the concept of the circulation of power. We have not, of course, discussed circulation in all of its nuance. Hopefully for the purposes of our analysis, it was adequate, as we must now turn to the space of circulation: the polis—that is, the city. We use the term polis to emphasize that the city as such was, from the beginning, explicitly conceived as a political apparatus. It defines the borders and maps the terrain of Western-style democracy. It is designed according to the logic of a particular political configuration. For this reason, much of modern political space is engineered to facilitate economic movement. Italian political philosopher Carlo Galli writes,

[P]olitics cannot but measure itself with space, that the control of space is one of the stakes in the game of power... It is, in other words, politics that arranges itself in space and that, moreover, arranges space itself, determining it, not only insofar as it represents space in thought, but also because it politicizes, produces, and structures space in reality. (Galli 5)

Thus, we are again in the domain of struggle, the game of power. What is politically possible is determined by the space of politics. In other words, spatial arrangements inform the conditions for action. Because we want to think specifically of Lincoln politics, this raises a significant question. How does space in Lincoln determine particular political formations? As we discussed above, nearly all of the protests in Lincoln privilege the capitol building, an empty vessel. Though it does not store power, it does have a function within relations of power. The steps of the capitol appear as a kind of town square, a space to give voice to grievances and petitions. This may be a vulgarly simple way of viewing the space, but it seems to us characteristic of how, at the very least, it is used.

The space of the capitol serves, then, to circulate the voice of the democratic political subject. The space contains the subject and creates the route for its participation in politics. The power the subject intends to exercise in this relation (between the subject itself and the political institution) passes according to the route that has been determined by the dominant political formation. How can an interruption of the political system occur if the action of the political subject is congruent with the dominating infrastructure? How can anything other than domination occur? This uncontested circulation is the tragic fate of political action that is not organized according to a discordant logic. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney suggest in *The Undercommons* that this discordant logic is something like improvisational jazz; it is something that takes shape in the spontaneity of the game—that game of power we continue to reference. We must improvise in order to avoid the trap of believing that these spatial arrangements serve anything other than the interests of the dominant class and the flow of capital. So far, Lincoln activists have sealed the act of protest into a predictable form, one that abides by the rules of normative politics. They have produced a movement that is immobile. We must avoid this stranglehold. We must allow ourselves to be fluid, our actions and organization to take any number of shapes. We must refuse totality and embrace infinity.

Inactive Activism and Finding Our Friends

It is likely that activists and organizers will continue to fall for the trap of normativity. We should warn activists of the pitfalls we have discussed, but we do not want to waste too much time and energy convincing liberal organizers of anything. They are not our friends. They are counter-insurgents. Instead, we implore Lincoln's rebels, delinquents, lumpenproles to create blockades along the state's and the economy's infrastructures. The battle is in the game of circulation, in the flows and stoppages of power and capital. We are not without recourse.

However, among Lincoln's activists, there is a sense of defeat and failed imagination from the outset. Organizers, even the "radical" sort, will say, "Stuff like that just doesn't happen here," abandoning revolutionary struggle and condemning themselves to the logic of liberal politics. We should cease playing within the confines of liberal-democracy or performing activist scripts. As we have discussed, we must completely reimagine the organizational relationship between the city and the economy. Building a revolutionary force is not just starting some sort of branded project, communal house, food distribution, etc.; these projects are important for building relationships, but if they do not reveal underlying antagonisms within the city and develop a plan to exacerbate them, then it is just another formal organization that exists only for itself without connection to struggle. Let us abandon our self-indulgent pet projects and stop worrying about the being behind the deed. Instead, the deed will take the place of the voice. The deed is the presence that words fail to represent. Silent incivility will break the grip of leaders, both those that the state imposes and those that attempt to quell us with their megaphones. We realize that the activists and the "left" in Lincoln will continue to jabber. And they can continue to do so as long as it pleases them. But they will remain as they have for so many years—perpetually burnt out, producing nothing but

cynicism for their efforts, trapped on the lonely island they inhabit. Under their leadership all protests have been unable to build long-term infrastructure. A handful of activist cliques have created a small world for their organizations where they mull about outside of any conflict except for the conflict they have between themselves.

That is no reason for us to despair. We are not activists. We do not need them. Demonstrations in the city should be one of the places we find each other, revealing ourselves to one another through our actions. It is our moment to break from the sadness of everyday life and to find evidence that we are not alone—we are everywhere. The first two nights of protest in May/June showed what we are capable of when we refuse the futile space of politics and instead make our own. We should reject designation. Our relationship to the city should be tactical. We should ask: What companies are gentrifying our neighborhoods? Which companies are investing in the city and causing displacement? How can these operations be interrupted or blocked? Where are the focal points of the local economy? What direction is capital flowing and where are the surveillance devices that protect it? What terrain gives us strategic advantages, and how can we disappear into the city when the job is done?

We will continue to explore these questions in the near future.

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