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Political exhaustion and the experiment of street: Boyle meets Hobbes in Occupy Madrid

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This essay describes the complex negotiations around stranger sociability, public space, and democratic knowledge that shaped the meetings of popular assemblies in the wake of the Spanish 15M/Occupy movement. The work of assembling was 'exhausting', by which participants would mean two things. In one sense, meetings would often turn into tiresome affairs, trying the patience and resilience of participants. In another sense, attendants would describe assemblies as spaces of political 'exhaustion', where politics as usual was emptied out and replaced by new democratic possibilities. We offer here an account of exhaustion as an ethnographic category. We are particularly interested in the role accorded to exhaustion as a vacuum enabling the appearance of novel social and political roles. We develop our argument by drawing a provocative analogy with the early history of scientific experimentation, where the nature of an 'assembly' of trusted peers and its location in genteel space became constitutive of a new type of experimental knowledge. What social and epistemic figures are popular assemblies bodying forth today?

> And now let us rise and go out into the streets, among people, to see whether a little shared tiredness may not be waiting for us and what it may have to tell us
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> Peter Handke, 'Essay on tiredness' (1994: 43)

The man sitting next to me mumbles unintelligibly. He always does. Over the weeks I [Alberto] have come to realize he is just repeating the words of the speaker to himself. It is an innocent gesture, but it is unsettling and distracting. Clara, who used to sit next to me at every assembly, now deliberately avoids him every Saturday. 'It's the last thing I need', she says; 'it's exhausting enough having to make it through three hours of meeting without having to put up with all this hissing and mumbling'. I was put off myself at the beginning. But then, some three Saturdays ago, he asked for the microphone. He stood up and started talking about the history of state schools in our neighbourhood. It turns out he is a retired schoolteacher. His name is Jacinto. He was eloquent and engaging and lucid. He has made three or four interventions since, always concise, yet enriched with the candour of hindsight and experience, and very often bringing a historical angle too, about the *barrio*'s (neighbourhood) shifting demographics and the contradictory pushes of immigration, working-class impoverishment, and gentrification. I have tried to engage him a couple of times at the end of the assembly, or during some of the assembly breaks, but it seems we are both a bit shy and I always feel lost for words. I despair at our mutual timorousness, which feels childish. Though perhaps it is not timidity that it is at stake. Our gathering in the open air makes for a strange social form. Whatever reasons bring people

to the assembly, there is a sense in which they *have* to collapse the moment the assembly is disbanded. Over time we have come to witness each other with wonder and trepidation as we pulsate and sound out the limits and thresholds of a nascent social body. We sit, and we listen, and we witness, and sometimes we touch something, we find something, someone. In honesty, it is not always clear what remains at the end of the assembly.

In the wake of the Spanish Occupy movement, which took to the streets on 15 May 2011, thousands of people gathered in the open air in plazas and public spaces all over the country to deliberate on and bring about a 'real democracy' at a municipal level. Over a hundred such local popular assemblies blossomed in Madrid alone. The meeting of the assemblies on a weekly basis suddenly transformed the public qualities of neighbourhood spaces. Attended by professionals and the unemployed, the elderly and the young, people who introduced themselves as 'feminists' or 'long-term political strategists' or 'hackers', the gatherings reproduced the conventional sociological dictums on urban cosmopolitanism (Vertovec & Cohen 2002).[1] Yet they did so in a format rarely seen before in public space. Assemblies took place in the open air, and in doing so blurred the lines separating formal and informal sociability. They shaped themselves into a public body that was at once a permeable yet robust structure, a space of engagement and invitation as well as a device for programmatic decision-making and action. As a specific type of get-together, the gatherings drew on the protocols and routines of conventional meetings, yet their public orientation and openness tested these in fascinating ways. Assemblies challenged not a few of the spatial, temporal, and social qualities that uphold the *form* of meetings as organizational projects.

For example, strangers and passers-by were always invited to join ongoing conversations, at the risk of having to suspend or interrupt the passing of important judgements or decisions. Occasionally, speakers would go on a rant, deviating abruptly from the topic under discussion. At other times, assemblies would be interrupted by nearby noises, such as the marching-by of a local school's music band, the alarming siren of a racing ambulance, or simply the dissonant falsettos of a high-spirited drunkard. Thus, the form of collective thinking and speaking that assemblies aimed for proceeded slowly, sometimes desperately so. As Clara put it somewhat harshly in the vignette above, assembly-goers conceded that assembling was exasperatingly tedious; at the *agora* of the assembly, politics was sometimes antagonistic, sometimes agonistic, but always '*agotador*' (Spanish: exhausting, tiring, tedious).[2]

This article reports on ethnographic work carried out at three popular assemblies in Madrid (Lavapiés, Prosperidad, and the General Assembly in Puerta del Sol) from June 2011 to June 2012. In this period we attended the weekly meetings of two *barrio* assemblies (Lavapiés and Prosperidad), and one of us (Adolfo Estalella) joined the 'facilitating taskforce' in charge of organizing the weekly gatherings of the Lavapiés crowd. Jointly or individually, we attended hundreds of assemblies, preparatory meetings, working groups, demonstrations, or direct actions. Our account builds on participant observation in all of these sites, as well as on formal and informal conversations, discussions, and interviews with assembly-goers across Madrid. We focus here on assembling as a social, material, and political process, and in particular on the significance of its taking residence as a form of meeting in the open air.

Central to this open-air location was the assembly's capacity to negotiate and measure up to the challenges of 'exhaustion'. The fieldwork extract with which we opened the essay, which rehearses elements of a conversation that Alberto had with some fellow

assembly-goers over the purpose and nature of assembling, captures nicely the thrust of our argument. Exhaustion, we want to suggest, is a complex social form, where tiredness, hopefulness, and indeterminacy coalesce in the sustenance of a social and political project. As we will see shortly, the assemblies delineated and carved out a cultural space that people described expressly as being 'evacuated' (*vaciado, agotado*) of its formal properties and wherein, it was said, a new democratic and political culture could be essayed and forged. However, negotiating the boundaries of such an emptied space 'in public' was far from straightforward. It called for an exploration of the limits of stranger-sociability, an exercise that, as the vignette illustrates, often taxed the patience of attendants. The body politic of the assembly became palpable, quite literally, in the exhaustion endured by participants.

This essay offers the concept of 'exhaustion' as a placeholder for understanding the peculiar and innovative type of meetings that assemblies brought forward in public space. Whilst it is true that in searching for 'freedom' or 'democracy' participants at the assemblies would generally encounter 'endless meetings' (Polletta 2002), there is also a sense in which the work of exhaustion reached beyond physical or emotional distress or tiredness. As we shall see, the thresholds of exhaustion marked also the material borderlands of the assembly as an urban object, its ambivalent and shifting status as a 'public' body, a gathering of people and things that suddenly destabilizes what public space is and how it gets invoked. Exhaustion also marks the umbra of hospitality, insofar as the assembly aspires to negotiate its way in and out of social relations of neighbourliness and passer-by witnessing (Spanish: *mirones*[3]), and, more amply, holds in suspension what stranger-sociability might mean (Sennett 1977; Simmel 1972). Finally, exhaustion affects the symbolism and imagination of the assembly. It summons a poetics of ruination and fatigue that has, notwithstanding, become constitutive of a new political awakening.

The centrality we accord to the notion of exhaustion makes for a slight departure from the existing literature on the global Occupy movement, which has either broadly focused on the epidemiology of protest (Postill 2014), where, as the argument goes, 'tweets' and 'streets' have played an equal and increasingly important part in the formation of a novel political ecology of direct action (Gerbaudo 2012); or it has argued for its entanglement within broader historical genealogies of radical political praxis, harking back to local traditions of anarchism (Graeber 2011), national traditions of minority rights advocacy (Martínez 2012; Moreno-Caballud 2014; Razsa & Kurnik 2012), or even larger agendas for urban transformation such as the 'right to the city' movement (Harvey 2012) or the Mediterranean tradition of urban political spontaneity (Leontidou 2012).

In this essay we break from from these traditions of political analysis and rehearse an alternative argument about the role of 'exhaustion' in the shaping of an emerging culture of political experimentation. We use the word 'experimentation' purposely, for it is in conversation with recent works in the history and sociology of science that we wish to explore the kind of epistemic work that exhaustion brings to the fore. In particular, we shall draw a provocative analogy between the 'assemblies' of seventeenth-century genteel experimentalists and Madrid's open-air assemblies in order to highlight the role that exhaustion played as an engine of political ontology in both cases. If the assemblies of natural philosophers are known today for having entangled anew the 'relations' of knowledge and/with the relations between people (Strathern 2014), we wish to explore here what novel epistemic and social bodies (if any) the Madrid assemblies might have brought forth into existence.

Assembling

When a call to organize popular neighbourhood assemblies was launched following the occupation of Madrid's Puerta del Sol on 15 May 2011, over a hundred initiatives responded across the city's *barrios*. Organizing the assemblies proved a relatively straightforward affair, insofar as they were all modelled after the 'assembly format' that had by then become a standard within the main Occupy encampment at Puerta del Sol (Corsín Jiménez & Estalella 2014). For instance, a week into Sol's occupation, a 'Neighbourhoods Commission' drafted a document known as the 'Quick Guide for Facilitating Assemblies' that thereafter functioned as a manual for organizing assembly work everywhere (AcampadaSol 2011). The guide was compiled using a variety of sources and expertise, including similar texts in use in the squatting movement (Lorenzo Vila & Martínez López 2005), field guides for community empowerment in developing contexts, or insights from the autonomous governance of ecovillages. This hybrid of expertise became a common feature throughout the assembly movement, for it was not unusual for assemblies to be attended by university professors, school teachers, architects, engineers, or development consultants in a variety of specialized fields.

The Quick Guide identified three areas of intervention: first, a series of protocols and procedures facilitating the installation of assemblies in public space; second, an inventory of tools and materials necessary for lending the assembly infrastructural continuity and coherence over time; and, third, a list of social techniques to help make the encounter between strangers in public space more congenial and hospitable. With regard to the protocol and method of assembling, the document recommended that all assemblies be facilitated by a 'moderator, a secretary in charge of taking minutes, someone responsible for taking turns for questions, and a group facilitating the production of consensus'. The document also offered some recommendations regarding the physical installation of the assembly in public space. Thus, it was suggested that the plaza or street be demarcated into two zones: a 'moderating space' and the assembly space proper. The former could be simulated into a theatrical stage of sorts, by having a 'rectangular perimeter mark out [the moderating space] with chalk or coloured tape on the floor'. The moderating space should be occupied by the person whose turn it was to speak. A team of people in charge of taking questions from the assembly would stand next to the speaker. They ought to be located 'as far away as possible from the team of secretaries, who are in charge of taking minutes, and who shall be close enough to the moderating space to request a repetition, a synthesis, or a copy of a document presented to the assembly'. The Guide also made specific recommendations on how to take minutes, which should include the day's agenda, a record of the various reports received (from specific taskforces or commissions), proposals made, discussions had, and any consensus reached.

Notwithstanding the recommendations made by the Guide, the practical management of assemblies was often a casual affair in which organizational formats had to be improvised for unplanned on-the-spot interventions. Adolfo joined Lavapiés Assembly's Facilitating Taskforce (*Grupo de Dinamización*) in September 2011 and remained a core member of the team for over ten months. The taskforce met one or two days ahead of the assembly to prepare the agenda and assign a rota of turns for each role (moderator, minute-taker, etc.). The following extract from Adolfo's fieldwork diary provides an insight into the tension between formality and informality that traversed assembly work:

We are having today's assembly at Plaza de Lavapiés, by the stairways to the National Centre for Drama. I arrive twenty minutes late. There's some people there already, included Emilio, who's been away for the past four weeks . . .

I speak to Emilio and see no agenda has been prepared. We were going to have a 'thematic assembly' to speak about police repression but it looks like the people who volunteered to organize it haven't showed up either . . .

Emilio and I talk about how to improvise an agenda for today's meeting. Amparo joins us and notes that someone from Tetuán's Assembly has offered to drop by to give us a talk on the new Employment Law and labour reform . . . We decide to draft an agenda on the spot, asking people for items to be included . . .

I get an SMS from Alicia saying that two police vans have parked next to Austria's Assembly. We wonder whether we should report it out loud in the assembly, but in the end decide not to, for fear that people will leave.

Since there's no agenda proper, the whole assembly is dedicated to 'other business'. There are a couple of issues raised: about last week's police raids against the protests organized in opposition to immigration policy, and about the protests against foreclosures. There are a couple of announcements too: two fundraising parties to help support work in support of illegal immigrants and against housing evictions . . . I take minutes and read them out loud. Emilio asks if there's consensus on the points raised. There is no dissent so we take that for a yes.

The person from Tetuán's Assembly is ready to talk about the labour reform. He talks for about twenty minutes. He is very clear and didactic. Quite a number of people stop by to hear what he has to say. By the time he finishes there are about fifty seated people listening . . .

We bring the assembly to an end with an anti-repression performance. A young man from an anti-repression group invites us to stand up. We're about thirty people now. A young woman holding a ball of wool calls her name out loud and throws the ball to another person whilst holding one end of the string. We're each meant to mimic her gesture. As the ball flies from one person to the next it weaves a web that connects us together. The performance draws the attention of numerous passers-by who stop to watch. We're then handed a balloon each, which we have to inflate. When we're ready, we start walking and moving around the plaza. At that point, a couple of young men start to chase us, bursting the balloons with needles. We are told to protect and care for the few people left with balloons. We run around trying to navigate the complex web and organize ourselves into some sort of caring structure. It has been lots of fun and we have pulled in quite a bit of an audience.

The assembly is over. Some of us decide to go for lunch at a nearby bar. We talk about the performance. It was a nice image: weaving a network of caretakers in public . . .

As the above example shows, over time, vulnerability and fragility became central markers of the assembly's 'public' identity. However, placing care at the heart of the assembly's residence in public space came at no small price. It demanded developing a concomitant 'methodology of care' (*metodología del cuidado*), as participants would put it. Such a methodology had both a social and a political dimension. We might think of it as a trap of sorts, a complex and ambiguous interface that had to mediate and care for the relationships within the group at the same time as it attempted to 'capture' the attention of *mirones* (passers-by) and strangers. As a meeting in public space, then, the assembly performed a complex double movement: on the one hand, a continuous eversion outwards, diluting its boundaries so as to become inviting and hospitable; on the other hand, and simultaneously, an attentive tending for and nurturing its insiders, lubricating and taking care of any frictions and hostilities.

For example, the emphasis on reaching 'consensus' noted in the vignette above was part and parcel of the methodology of care. From the earliest days of direct action at Sol's encampment, the notion of 'consensus' played a fundamental part in the work of assembling. In many respects, assembling was conceived as both a political philosophy and a sociological theory of consensus. The first draft of the Quick Guide, published fifteen days after the occupation, already defined a 'Popular Assembly' as a 'participatory decision-making tool (*órgano*) that aims for consensus'. Consensus became the *raison d'être* of assembling, the mechanism for its perpetual motion. The various roles assigned to the team of facilitators (moderator, minute-takers, question-takers, etc.) aimed to work as the assembly's sensorium, making sure that the method of consensus would do double duty as a device for political reasoning and bargaining, at the same time as it assured the assembly's singular expression as a knowing and caring body.

In this latter sense, the production of consensus was also understood to require a particular modality of sociability, a social 'climate of relaxation, listening, respect, and complicity among attendants', as the Quick Guide put it. Crucial in this regard was the construction of the assembly as a hospitable environment. The Guide spoke of the importance of keeping a 'relaxing and respectful atmosphere' throughout the assembly, and supplementary texts provide specific advice and techniques on how to accomplish this. The general tenor of these texts presents the assembly as an all-in-one therapeutic, ludic, and political installation. For example, 'When someone who is known to be sensitive and positive finds herself constrained and incapable of reason, we embrace her and tell her: "Dear friend, we know what you are capable of"'. Similarly, facilitators were encouraged to greet newcomers so they would not feel like strangers, and in a related, if somewhat different, vein, it also became common for assemblies to organize parallel activities to the forum itself, in the hope that the presence of the assembly in the open air would become welcoming and inviting to bystanders or neighbouring families. In the neighbourhood of Coslada, for example, one of the attendees, a professional clown, regularly performed in the assembly space to break up the long hours of meetings. In Lavapiés and Dos de Mayo, children's assemblies (*chiqui-asambleas*) were hosted for the young to discuss matters of interest to them, while their parents attended their own assembly. Assemblies have also been known to organize barter markets, workshops, and walks, or to open or close their meetings with collective and public meals.

Exhaustion

Assemblies have sustained themselves in public space as amphibious formations, at once political gatherings, theatrical productions, co-operative markets, open-air festivals, public spectacles, and children's playgrounds. Right from the outset, assembly-goers were conscious of the importance of keeping control over the temporal and spatial forms of the assembly and their hold over attendees. It was widely understood that the form of the assembly as an open meeting in public space had a fragility that had to be cared for. 'Haste and tiredness', the Quick Guide alerted on its first page, 'are the enemies of consensus' (*la prisa y el cansancio son los enemigos del consenso*). The question of tiredness or exhaustion (*cansancio, agotamiento, desgaste*, in three of the most usual formulations) quickly became one of the central tenets of the management of expectations within assemblies. Perhaps the most famous slogan of the assembly movement, '*vamos despacio porque vamos lejos*' (we move slowly because we aim high), already identifies the temporality of exhaustion as an inevitable political horizon, at once its condition of possibility and a potential source of strain and destruction.

The idiom of exhaustion popped up everywhere in people's accounts of assembly work. At times it figured as an image of fear, a menacing place that threatened to paralyse and trample everything that had been accomplished to date. Exhaustion triggered a particular type of self-consciousness about the productivity of political work. For example, some people explicitly described Sol's General Assembly as 'an assembly that works by and through exhaustion (*cansancio*), where decisions are always reached in the eleventh hour'. Exhaustion would regularly be invoked in this sense as a limit-holder, an ambiguous threshold, hard to identify, let alone to inhabit and dwell within, and yet one which signalled the very productivity of the assembly as a political form. It became the default theoretical space from which to think politics as both impasse and potentiality. For instance, at the public reading of a manifesto at the first Inter-Neighbourhoods Assembly on 5 November 2011, the notion of exhaustion was explicitly foregrounded as the fulcrum of political hopefulness and action:

> Following the enthusiasm and multitudinous attendance of the first assemblies in May 2011, we are now going through a deflationary stage. Those of us who remain involved in the assembly movement, although tired (*cansados*), we are still committed and willing to work even harder.
>
> We are exhausted (*cansados*) because we are struggling to open up spaces of creativity at the same time as we have to confront extreme situations that constrain us and demand immediate reaction on our part. We are exhausted because we have no time for reflection and serious debate, because we are not content with what we have achieved despite the fact that we have only been at it for five months. We are babies and yet we want to run the 100 m hurdles race. (Asamblea de los Barrios del Sur 2011: 1)

At other times, however, exhaustion was invoked as a space of joy, an experience of physical exhilaration, where finally one's relation with the world was felt to be unbounded. 'We have been here, sitting outdoors in the burning sun, for over three hours now', Adolfo noted in his fieldwork diary a year into his weekly attendance of assembly meetings. 'People come and go and I stay put. It's been a long time since I last spent a morning like this, doing nothing. It must be apathy or because I'm exhausted (*debe ser la desidia o el cansancio*), but otherwise I feel as if I'm in a state of grace'. The assembly bracketed the world outside for a while, and although debates and discussions would occasionally turn rancorous or inconsequential, some people relished the idea of spending a few hours 'doing nothing' (*sin hacer nada*) whilst enjoying the morning sun.

There is another sense in which exhaustion became productive for assembly-goers. In November 2012 a group of activists from the Lavapiés assembly camped in front of Bankia's headquarters in Madrid. (Formerly a private bank, Bankia was partially nationalized by the Spanish government in May 2012 following a requested bailout of €19 billion.) One day, one of the bank's employees, having to negotiate her way to the main entrance, commented, 'You are nice people but you are *cansinos* (exhausting)'. The guerrilla artivist group GILA[4] thence adopted the theme of '*cansinismo*' to launch a campaign that aimed to paralyse the bank's activities for one day by developing a 'creatively exhausting' style of sociability. Under the rubric 'Creativity, camouflage and exhaustion' (*Creatividad, camuflaje y cansinismo*), GILA called assembly-goers to walk 'camouflaged as clients' into Bankia's branches all over Spain and subject the bank's employees to endless information requests. 'We want to bring the operations of the bank to the point of collapse by the sheer forces of pacification and exhaustion', noted one of GILA's members.

Experiment

Although 'exhaustion' has rarely been accorded any centrality in political theory, there is in fact a distinguished tradition in the history of science that awards it a prominent place in the configuration of the modern ontology of politics. We are referring to Steve Shapin and Simon Schaffer's celebrated account of the controversy surrounding the nature of experimental work in seventeenth-century England, and in particular their description of the polemic between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes over the capacity of air-pumps to produce real vacuums (Shapin & Schaffer 1985; on the role of the controversy in the making of the 'moderns', see Latour 1993). As we shall see shortly, the history of the production of the vacuum – of the 'exhaustion of air' – was fundamentally entangled with the 'assembling' of genteel witnesses, who were, by their presence, said to lend political and epistemic credibility to the practice of experimentation. In the rest of the essay we wish to draw a provocative analogy between the role that 'exhaustion' played in this seventeenth-century scenario and in the Madrid Occupy movement. We are aware of the analogical risk we are taking here. We would like to suggest, however, that there is scope for exploring the historical and cultural role accorded to 'exhaustion' as a *tabula rasa* from which novel assemblages of relations and knowledge are said to rise. What kinds of relations are summoned to inhabit an 'exhausted' space or body, and why do such spaces become springboards for political hopes and fears? In particular, we are intrigued by the role assigned to assemblies in both the circumscription and mobilization of exhaustion to political and experimental uses. Let us return to the seventeenth century.

Not a few of the famous discussions that Boyle and Hobbes had over the ontology of the vacuum centred on the quality of the exhaustion in the pump: how 'the constitution of the air', as the experimentalists talked about it, depended in great measure on the integrity of the air-pump and whether the apparatus leaked or not. Thus, Boyle once noted that it was 'nonsensical for Hobbes to maintain that "our receiver, when we say it is almost *exhausted*, is as full as ever (for he will have it perfectly full) of common air"' (cited in Schaffer & Shapin 1985: 180, emphasis added). For Boyle, the exhaustion-vacuum complex was fundamentally a 'matter of fact' to be produced and tested experimentally. He was less interested in endowing the world with particular metaphysical qualities than in opening up a space in which to keep producing experimental knowledge. As Shapin and Schaffer put it:

> The finite leakage of the pump was not, in [Boyle's] view, a fatal flaw but a valuable resource in accounting for experimental findings and in exemplifying the proper usage of terms like 'vacuum'. The 'vacuum' of his exhausted receiver was thus *not an experiment but a space in which to do experiments* and generate matters of fact without falling into futile metaphysical dispute. And it was *an experimental space about which new discursive and social practices could be mobilized to generate assent* (1985: 46, emphasis added).

Hobbes, on the other hand, abhorred the idea that the air-pump could be exhausted of air. For him, the idea of a vacuum was abominable, a *horror vacui*, for it was conducive to a world of wide, open dissent, populated by objects and phenomena (ghosts, spirits, witches) of disreputable ontological provenance. A vacuum was a source environment for ontological chaos. Indeed, this was the ontological mayhem that Hobbes thought the priestcraft had long parasitized upon and benefited from, and for which he held the Church responsible at the advent of the Civil War.

Hobbes' political ontology may therefore be cast as a formula against exhaustion. Insofar as Hobbes is the father of modern political theory (Skinner 2008), we may therefore say that exhaustion played a crucial formative role in the ontology of modern politics. *It was against exhaustion that the ontology of politics took shape.* However, exhaustion also played a formative role in the ontology of modern experimentation, for of course it was the orchestration of exhaustion as a matter of fact that Boyle worked so hard to produce in his air-pump trials. We may say analogously that in *searching for exhaustion, the ontology of experiment took shape.*

Air-pumping assemblies

Our argument rises from this dual and ambiguous (against/for) role of exhaustion as an ontological engine of both politics and experiment. We want to suggest that there might be scope for a conception of *exhaustion as political experiment*, where exhaustion need not be conceived solely as a deterrent of agency (something to work against) nor as a goal in itself (something to work for). The concept of exhaustion as a form of political experiment dwells instead on the ambiguity of its ontological affordances as now a vital source, now an ominous threat, of potential energies.

Yet how to hold exhaustion stable as an analytical figure across such widely divergent historical and social contexts, from seventeenth-century England to twenty-first-century Spain? In the English context, as we have seen, the Boylean 'vacuum' was 'not an experiment', as Shapin and Schaffer put it, 'but a space about which new discursive and social practices could be mobilized to generate assent' (Shapin & Schaffer 1985: 46). Therefore, to be for or against exhaustion was not simply a matter of being for or against the ontology of the vacuum. It mobilized, also, an accompanying argument about the political ontology of *dissent* itself.

So what about the Spanish context? What epistemic and political bodies did Madrid's assemblies air-pump into the vacuum spaces of plazas and streets? We have already seen the efforts that the assemblies put into designing spaces of hospitality and conviviality conducive to the production of *consensus*. The 'methodology of care' (*metodología del cuidado*) was construed as both political epistemology and sociology: a tool for eliciting the assembly as an *organon* of collective thought and reason *and* a design for the socialization of stranger-relationality in public space. Indeed, right from the outset, there was an understanding that the assemblies' location in the open air opened up novel spaces for political action and knowledge, that there was a particular way in which politics was exhausted through the occupation of public space. For instance, at an assembly meeting of Sol's encampment's Commission on Thought (*Comisión de Pensamiento*), there was a specific debate on the use of the term 'popular' to refer to the assembly movement (fieldwork diary, Adolfo, 16 June 2011):

> *Young man*: Right from the very first day ours has been an attempt at rescuing plazas, at opening up spaces (*abrir espacios*) for anyone's use ...
>
> *Woman*: We are driven by a desire to exhaust democracy (*el deseo de agotar la democracia*), to radicalize the experience of democracy, for ours is a society that falsifies what democracy is about, that misrepresents democracy for capitalism.
>
> *Young man*: Ours is a structure of neighbourhood assemblies ... We are all neighbours (*vecinos*), we are a *topos*, a place ... We are proposing a place for everyone and anyone. That's what's meant by 'popular', a space for all, where a neighbour need not have the same ideas as I do but she feels the place is hers too.

The exchange shows the extent to which assemblies were imagined as a practice for the exhaustion of politics 'as we know it'. Such an exhaustion opened up a vacuum (*abrir*

espacios, in the idiom used above) for novel forms of social and political association: a tentative and uncertain *topos* of neighbourly relations. The vignette captures also, however, the hesitation and ambiguity in naming these novel forms. Thus, whilst over the following months the word 'neighbour' (*vecino*) gained traction when referring to the constituency of assemblies, the term 'neighbourhood assemblies' was always rejected in favour of 'popular assemblies'. It is perhaps not too far-fetched, then, to think of assemblies as air-pumps for the exhaustion of classic representational politics, as instruments 'for exhausting capitalist democracy', as the woman put it in the vignette above. Assemblies exhausted the 'public' out of public space and the 'neighbourhood' out of the 'neighbour'. They gave new valences to these terms by re-signifying the kinds of knowledge and acknowledgements guiding the assembling of strangers in public space.

As an ethnographic category, then, 'exhaustion' at Madrid's popular assemblies movement provided a placeholder for a shifting complex of sentiments regarding physical fatigue and exhilaration, a social praxis of care, nurturance, and hospitality, and a creative manipulation of the material conditions of space. Exhaustion signalled a culture of political transformation whose centre was 'assembled', also, as an exhausted space: a space that was perceived as being 'emptied out', such that people's relations to each other as neighbours could be entangled anew into a specific experience of democracy.

When seventeenth-century natural philosophers first started congregating to share their mutual interests in and findings about experimental practices, their 'assembling' into a physical space and social body became no trivial matter either. The location of these 'houses of experiment', as Steve Shapin calls them (1988), was of great consequence to the types of knowledge that experimentalists were entitled to lay claims to. Experiments took place in a variety of venues,

> from the apothecary's and instrument maker's shop, to the coffeehouse, the royal palace, the rooms of college fellows, and associated collegiate and university structures. But by far the most significant venues were the private residences of gentlemen ... The overwhelming majority of experimental trials, displays, and discussions that we know about occurred within private residences (Shapin 1988: 378).

The location of experimental work in the privacy of the home, argued Shapin, determined crucial questions of epistemology, such as the shaping of curiosity as a solitary enterprise, modelled after the 'models of space' of the 'monastic cell and the hermit's hut', where one could insulate oneself 'from distraction, temptation, distortion and convention' (1988: 384). Yet it also demanded that the threshold of privacy and intimacy of the home be negotiated such that certain witnesses were allowed inside the house in order to validate and lend credibility to the experimental findings. 'If experimental knowledge did indeed have to occupy private space during part of its career', observed Shapin, 'then its realization as authentic knowledge involved its transit to and through a public space' (1988: 384).

Knowledge was therefore attested to be valid, valuable, and creditworthy when assembled in the presence of gentlemen of good standing. The nature of this 'assembly' became absolutely central to the experimental project. Thomas Sprat, the Royal Society's first historian, already described as early as 1667 the importance of the role of the 'Assembly' in 'resolv[ing] upon the matter of *Fact*' (Shapin & Schaffer 1985: 58). The sociology of this assembly, the trustworthiness of its membership, helped define the

reliability and objectivity of experimental knowledge. Although there were of course a number of referents of social intercourse that the assembly of experimentalists modelled itself after,[5] much was made of the importance of its members standing in no relation of servitude, of them being free from 'sordid Interests' (Joseph Glanvill, cited in Shapin 1988: 396), including, for example, freedom from mercantile relations, or freedom from labour relations, such as was the case with the technicians who aided in the experimental set-ups, whose labour was paid for. Freedom from relations, in other words, was a warrant for the assembling of knowledge anew, and it was the nature of this 'assembly' of knowledge and people that was self-consciously perceived as a singularly unique and novel social space.[6]

The coupling of 'relations' and 'knowledge' across social domains in seventeenth-century England is also the subject of a recent series of articles by Marilyn Strathern (e.g. 2014; 2017), part of her long-standing inquiry into the duplex nature of the relation as an epistemic and social figure. Strathern is particularly interested in the 'widening ethos of association' that led to the articulation of 'society' as a novel discursive object of public consciousness in that historical moment (2014: 11). One example of such novel use would be the Royal Society's corporate self-designation as a 'society', that is, an assembly of people that experimented not only with matters of fact but also with their own sociality as a matter of concern – a matter of trustworthiness, credibility, and, as noted above, *freedom of and from relation.*

Yet, according to Strathern, there might be room for exploring a parallel source of epistemic creativity in the seventeenth century, one that heeds attention to the 'abstraction' of knowledge not just from the *societies of experiment* (the houses and assemblies of genteel natural philosophers), but also from the *experiments of society*: from the creativity that familial and interpersonal networks invested in the use of novel generic terms for designating kin and affinal connections, paramount amongst which was the term 'relation'. 'The precise significance of generics, such as "relations" and "friends" (and later "connections") for kin ties', she writes, 'was that they combined recognition – acknowledging the kinship of this or that person, that is, choosing to know them – without specifying degree, without, in short, specifying the nature of the tie, and thus the kinship "properties" embodied (my phrasing) in those who were related' (Strathern 2014: 10). As such a generic term, 'relation' thus captured a sense of openness regarding kinship connections that echoed the epistemic uncertainty and possibility at play in experimental trials. This capacity of relations to 'abstract' knowledge of people and the world has proved extremely fertile since. So much so, Strathern suggests, that it makes one wonder how anthropology has come to the language that makes all theories and discourses about 'kinship to be about relations' (2014: 13).[7]

Here we wish to follow Strathern's inspiring analysis and ask whether we might not consider Madrid's popular assemblies as experiments of society in their own right. These are *experiments of street*, where the assembly migrates the thresholds of witnessing, trustworthiness, and credibility to the open air, and where relations of knowledge and familiarity are cast anew among strangers and neighbours. As noted above, the word 'neighbour' (*vecino*) was self-consciously adopted by assemblies to designate the congregation of souls they bodied forward in space. The assembling of neighbours was an experiment in abstraction with effects not unlike those ascribed by Strathern to the 'relation'. In this usage, *vecinos* were not simply spatial or territorial subjects, but political and epistemic agents too. Assemblies provided a *topos* for a form of knowing and recognizing one's political and social surroundings, of which the *barrio*

(neighbourhood) and the *vecino* became at once specific and generalized terms of reference.

Conclusion: at the end of the assembly

Byung-Chul Han has recently written a philosophical meditation on what he calls our 'burnout society' (Han 2015). Han seeks to refute a widespread philosophical thesis that characterizes our age as an 'immunological' era, where concepts of identity take shape through dynamics of rejection, negativity, or enmity. In other words, where the 'other' is defined by the imagination of immunological invasion. But our society, Han suggests, is no longer defined by the pathology of viruses and bacteria, by immunology. We are no longer moved by a compulsion towards expulsion and negativity. Ours is rather a society that runs on an excess of positivity, where there is too much of everything: production, performance, information (Han 2015: 5). The violence and exigencies of positivity have driven the self to the point of exhaustion. We have been drained by an ever-accelerating compulsion for self-enhancement. We are a 'burnout society'.

There might be a way out of burnout society, however, that draws on fatigue's own existential resources for escaping the culture of positivity. Seeking inspiration in Peter Handke's 'Essay on tiredness' (1994), Han identifies a more fundamental form of tiredness, a feeling of abandonment that takes residence in the world without calling for differentiations. Instead, this form of fatigue dwells in a space of in-betweenness, a 'space of friendliness-as-indifference' where the self 'abandons itself' to the world around us and the things of the world lose their sharpness and distinctiveness, their otherness, and give way to an 'aura of friendliness' (Han 2015: 31, 33). This abandoning further opens up the self to the tactility of the world: we surrender our self to the 'touch' of others (Han 2015: 32). 'This tiredness', writes Han, 'founds a deep friendship and makes it possible to conceive of a community that requires neither belonging nor relation' (2015: 33). Instead, it is founded on an experience of pacification that grows out of 'a particular rhythm ... that leads to agreement, proximity, and vicinity ... without familial or functional connections' (Han 2015: 34).

The experience of tiredness and pacification that Han talks about echoes aspects of the politics of exhaustion that we have described in this essay. This is the feeling of abandonment and exhilaration that Adolfo noted in his fieldwork diary, or indeed the hopeful melancholy invoked in the last sentences of our opening vignette: 'We sit, and we listen, and we witness, and sometimes we touch something, we find something, someone. In honesty, it is not always clear what remains at the end of the assembly (*al final de la asamblea*)'. Yet the form of exhaustion that conjures the 'end of the assembly' as an image of political hope moves also beyond the romantic ethos and political communitarianism implied in Han's analysis. Indeed, it has been our intention in this essay to show the extent to which political exhaustion 'exhausts' the political as we know it. Assembly politics certainly draws on the cultural and historical resources of deliberative and representational democracy: the politics of oratory and rhetoric; the boundaries of communicative action in public space; the theatrics of agonism and antagonism; the normative 'veil of ignorance' through which we are all made into strangers (Rawls 1999). But if there is a community – a vicinity, Han calls it; a neighbourhood, in the idiom used by assemblies – that this political exhaustion calls into existence, it is not one that is canvassed from the resources of political theory. Rather, this is a politics born in the vacuum of politics, outside the ontological spaces that Hobbes first inaugurated for it. The ontology of this politics is to be found

elsewhere, in the spaces of experiment. For if exhaustion was something abhorred by the Hobbesian imagination of political agency, it was, on the contrary, something to look for in the manufacturing of experimental knowledge. In opening up a space for exhaustion, seventeenth-century natural philosophers such as Boyle were making room for novel 'assemblies' of instruments, people, and relations. 'At the end of the assembly', then, might be a fit image for both: a limit space where exhaustion finally yields a political deed, but also an ever-receding horizon of experimental trial. At the end of the assembly, Boyle meets Hobbes in the experiment of street.

NOTES

[1] We can hardly provide here a sociological overview of the hundreds of assemblies that popped up in Madrid. Generally speaking, assemblies reproduced the demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds of the neighbourhoods wherein they took residence. In response to the specific needs of each neighbourhood, some assemblies developed 'stronger' working groups than others. For example, in Prosperidad, a neighbourhood at the epicentre of a large and socially diverse district (Chamartín), where there are known to be large differences in the quality of education provided by local state schools, the assembly became known across the city for its 'Education' working group. The Lavapiés assembly, on the other hand, became well known for its 'Immigration' and 'Housing' working groups. On the whole, assemblies reproduced the rich heterogeneity of urban life.

[2] *Agotamiento* offers us in this guise a phonetic and conceptual counterpoint to Chantal Mouffe's distinction between 'agonistic' and 'antagonistic' political traditions (2005).

[3] *Mirón* stands for 'he or she who looks at', that is, a 'seer' or 'onlooker'. *Mirones* are also said to use their detached position to '*mirar por encima*', to over-see. In this sense *mirones* may be said to oversee or supervise that which they are looking at. They occupy an ambiguous position between observers and witnesses, hence our referring to them as 'passer-by witnesses'.

[4] An acronym for *Grupo de Intervención de Lavapiés*, Lavapiés Intervention Group.

[5] As Shapin puts it, 'The relationship between the proceedings of the early Royal Society and the Interregnum London coffeehouse merits extended discussion, most particularly in connection with the rules of good order in a mixed assembly. Other elements resonate of the monastery, the workshop, the club, the college, and the army' (1988: 393).

[6] Shapin cites Thomas Sprat's description to this effect: 'Sprat said that the "cure" for the disease afflicting current systems of knowledge "must be no other, than to form an Assembly at one time, whose privileges shall be the same; whose gain shall be in common; whose Members were not brought up at the feet of each other"' (Shapin 1988: 397).

[7] Because, of course, kinship is a form of knowledge that preceded this *new* relationality, and that, subsequent to these seventeenth-century shifts, became conditioned by it.

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Épuisement politique et expérimentation de la rue : Boyle rencontre Hobbes chez Occupy Madrid

Résumé

Le présent essai décrit les négociations complexes entourant la sociabilité entre inconnus, l'espace public et les connaissances démocratiques qui ont marqué les assemblées populaires dans le sillage du mouvement 15M/Occupy en Espagne. Le travail de rassemblement a été « épuisant » selon les participants, ce qui peut vouloir dire deux choses : dans un sens, les réunions se sont souvent avérées usantes pour la patience et la résilience des participants. Dans un autre sens, elles ont été décrites comme des espaces « d'épuisement » de la chose politique, décortiquée et remplacée par de nouvelles possibilités démocratiques. Les auteurs proposent ici un récit de l'épuisement comme catégorie ethnographique, en s'intéressant en particulier au rôle qui lui est accordé comme vide permettant l'apparition de rôles sociaux et politiques nouveaux. Ils élaborent leur argument par le biais d'une analogie provocatrice avec les premières expérimentations scientifiques, dans lesquelles la nature d'une « assemblée » de pairs de confiance et sa localisation dans l'espace profane sont devenues constitutives d'un nouveau type de connaissances expérimentales. Quelles figures sociales et épistémiques les assemblées populaires incarnent-elles aujourd'hui ?