



tent X manual #1 the Yoyo

a tent X zine Siraj Izhar 2011

Unpacking and setting up Manual #1

The tent X manuals are not about setting up the tent literally but an abstract approach to the how and why it operates - a sort of mental setting up.

This manual **Manual #1** is for exposed situations subject to arbitrary or unilateral invasion or hostile assertions of power by external forces or those of the State.

For such circumstance, Manual#1 setup tries to create a balance through the yin yang structure to add resilience and stability to plumb the sharp-edged volatile environment. It is designed for brief sorties not long encampments! Nonetheless we should note that the basic elements of the tent would be the same for any environment though the configuration would vary.

Zine space for annotations and sketches

fold

The English historian EP Thompson wrote extensively about the formation of history through the prism of human experience rather than institutional structures and their master narratives. How subjective reality at one particular historical moment becomes objective reality in another is a process that tent X sets out to explore through engaging with lived realities. Tent X is a means of 'figuring' objective reality out of subjective reality; some of this process takes place onsite, in the tent, some of it offsite elsewhere. The tent schemes out processes for engaging the systems of power, the methods of extracting the subjective experience of such realities onto objective structures where they can exercise a role in the construction of new social realities.

tent X Components:

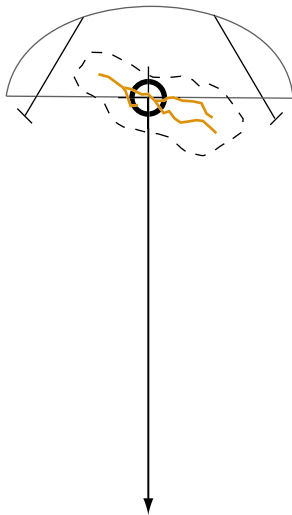
1 The Human Subject

With the tent, at first comes the human but the human inside the tent is itself 2 things:

- a. a Physical Body or bare life *zoé*
- b. a Political Subject or legal citizen *bios*

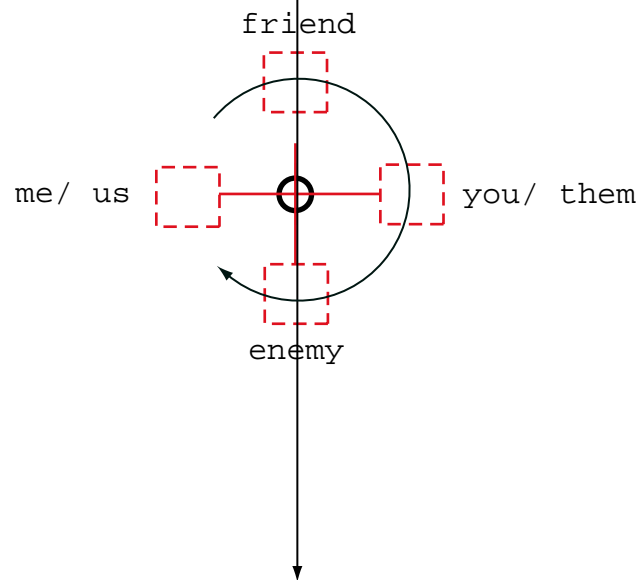
This distinction between bare life and the political subject comes from Giorgio Agamben, the contemporary Italian political philosopher who has written about the subject of the *homer sacer* (sacred man), a Roman citizen who was stripped of his rights and forced to live outside the law. *homer sacer* was thus reduced to mere physical existence, bare life.

For tent X, this distinction is vital when entering the tent, as in effect it means a de-coupling, a separation of the human body from the human subject; this will increasingly be a key strategy in the possibility of making new social realities. The essential thing to note is that to target the human subject is not necessarily to target the body but to reduce it to bare life.



2 With the human comes the political by default. For Carl Schmitt, the German political theorist of how political power operates in the 20th century State, the political begins with an understanding of the friend-enemy relation, the creation of a 'we' in opposition to 'them', a me versus the you. Without this there can be no political. This is the primary motor around which the rotor blades of the political revolve.

It is the foundation of all of the relationships relating to the tent and in turn to everything around it. How it changes depends on how the rest of the tent set up continues.



3 The occupation of space is the all important act of the tent. It is how the tent gets 'real' and sets up the territory of the tent which consists of :

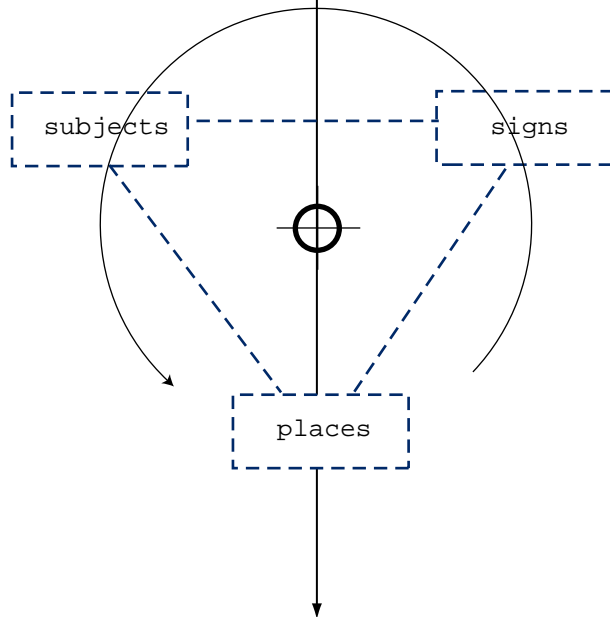
a the human Subjects : the social dimension the tent engages with, the other people, the public, the authorities, the society.

b the Signs and communications tools and environment that the tents creates or is framed by - the banners, posters, language conventions, events and rituals, ..

Sometimes these are self made, sometimes they are imposed; sometimes its in your face, sometimes its anonymous.

c the Place where the tent is located as for example at Parliament Square. Place is critical to the operation of the tent, how it exerts an influence on society, the social context in which it operates, and how it accomodates, interacts or resists the varied forces that may engage it.

A key political concept that accompanys the act of occupation is that of hegemony which is about the nature of the inter-relations between different human subjects, the power balances, how they produce or reproduce hierarchies, allow some to represent their values and other not to.



Hegemony has a major role in how the tent functions, how it can generate new meanings and situations. It makes sense to devote a few more words to hegemony to consider its importance in the tent's setup [but you can skip this page if you want to]

Hegemony applies equally to Subjects, Signs, Places.

Between the human subjects, hegemony effects how any individual or social group or class exerts cultural leadership or dominance over another.

With signs, what is allowed, what messages get seen or get reproduced.

The Argentinean theorist Ernesto Laclau for instance talks about the hegemony of signs and his work is useful to the way we can see the tent's environment working. Laclau sees hegemony not in terms of a pre-given set of ideas or relationships but as something that emerges from the theatre of political interaction of groups. Therefore we should not see hegemony in purely negative terms. It is possible for example to build new hegemonies, an example being the hegemony of socialism proposed by Antonio Gramsci.

A critical role for tent X in this is the identification of what Laclau calls 'floating signifiers'.

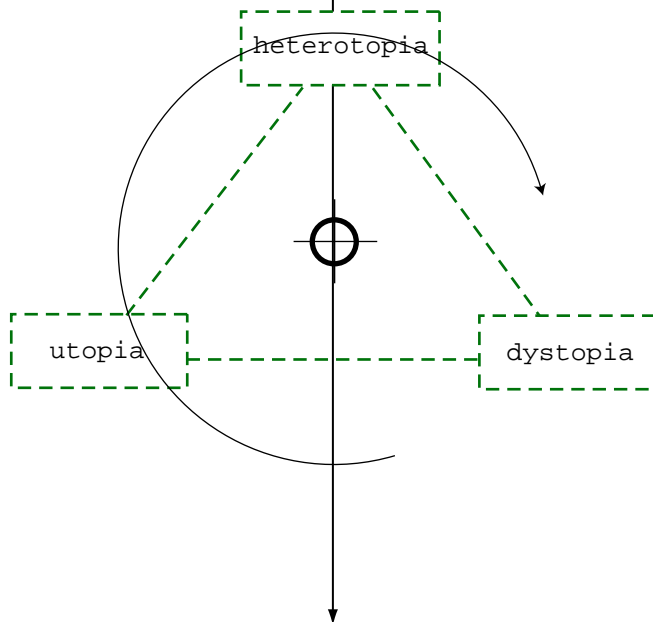
A signifier is something real trying to communicate - like a pointing finger, a shout. Thus for example, a Signifier of a raised V sign = Signified, the mental image of victory?

The signified is the concept, the meaning, in the mind of the perceiver/s and is internal to them. When we share concepts, we do so via signifiers. A floating signifier is one that is 'open' to contestation and can give meaning to radically different political possibilities.

When we are at ease in an environment we do not have to take these things apart, and we share our experiences seamlessly. But in contested situations, the role of the floating signifier across cultural and language gaps becomes important. If we are aware of their role, we can overturn existing hegemonies through multiple ways. That's what the tent is set up to explore. The tent is itself a floating signifier and also the perfect container to generate new signifiers to work around stuck hegemonies.

4 deals with the issue of time, the stages that the tent inhabits. The tent is a fragile entity, its infrastructure of life and social support systems is contingent. Thus the lifecycle of the tent is defined not by calendar time but by its symbolic political phases:

- a. utopia - the tent is set up with aspirations that are projected onto society in perfected or idealised forms. Though rarely reciprocated, these bear the agendas, the visions, the demands, the questions, the possibilities.
- b. dystopia, the end game in which the psychological or material conditions of the tent's existence and relations collapse either internally or through external pressure.
- c. heterotopia is the in-between working space that is self constructed by the tent, it is how the tent evolves on its own terms an independent and determined function in an environment. The heterotopia is the window of time which allows a glimpse of what it possible or realisable between the utopian and dystopian. Michel Foucault described the heterotopia as the key temporal space where simultaneously the mythic and real contestation of space takes place. It is through heterotopia that the real experimentation takes place but utopias and dystopias are just as important.



5 marks out the boundaries of the tent's operations, outlines its **praxis**. Praxis means the combination of active engagement and creative imagination. It builds the tent's political horizon through connecting a social imaginary with public imagination. Without the making of a social imaginary, no form of political action is meaningful; without engagement with the public imagination, no political action is worthwhile.

In extreme social situations, it can be easy to lose sight of the tent as a self-made social imaginary but it has to be there on the horizon, an internal praxis inside the tent connecting to an external praxis outside.

Equally it may also seem difficult to engage public imagination as communication channels like the media are usually aligned to dominant agendas, but this is a part of the totality of praxis: the passage between Social Imaginary and Public Imagination through the different components of the tent set up outlined here.

