Occupy Everything:
Anarchists in the Occupy Movement
2009 - 2011

edited by
Aragorn!

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Most of the material in this book has been written by anonymous anarchists and posted to the internet. Anarchists write anonymously because they don't believe in singular authorship. They write anonymously because in many contexts what they are saying is illegal.

We write anonymously because we are conspiring to take apart everything in this world.

Occupy has been as energizing of a moment for anarchists in North America as we have had since the events in Quebec City in 2001 and Seattle in 1999. This book is about this moment in the context of past anarchist occupations and of future anarchist actions. It is an expression of anarchist hope, anger, and energy.

This book would not have been possible without the great effort of many people. This includes the named and unnamed authors in this book and Ariel Attack, Alejandro De Acosta, Gold Tooth, Lawrence Jarach, Sam K, Kathryn, Brandon Long, Mitch, Tim Simone, the STL crew, the NC posse for showing me a time, SC "Team Occupy", The Oakland Commune for making me believe, Zoe from Denver, and the Phoenix Class War Council for being the coolest class essentialists around.

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Introduction

This is a book about anarchists in the Occupy Movement. The Occupy Movement is a broader category of activity than the Occupy Wall Street movement but is inclusive of it. The Occupy Movement also includes the student occupation movement of 2009, the so-called Arab Spring that swept the central plazas of North Africa, the Indignados of Europe in the summer of 2011, the work of the NYC general assemblies prior to September, and the wave of home reclamation projects that have happened in late 2011. The Occupy Movement includes actions against austerity measures, against legacy dictatorships, and against capitalism as a whole.

Anarchists have been involved in every aspect of this phase of the movement. We raised our flag from the top of the New School for Social Research during the occupation in early 2009 and are still occupying new buildings at the end of 2011. We have brought people, ideas, and methodologies that have infused the Occupy Movement with a potent energy.

We hope that this energy continues beyond the Fall 2011 period of “camping occupations” and actions into a series of new approaches toward occupation. We hope that the imagination of the past two years isn’t suffocated by the monied political machine of representative politics that will dominate the public imagination in 2012. We leave 2011 filled with wonder at what has been accomplished in the past three years, and prepared for anything to happen in 2012.

The terms Anarchism, Anarchy, and Anarchistic are central to the relationship between a (nearly) two hundred year old political philosophy that comes out of the foment of the French Revolution, and a digitally fueled movement called Occupy.

Anarchism is the term used for both the history of that political philosophy and the philosophy itself. The debates of how to interpret this history and this philosophy are anarchism. They are vital, heated, and often gurgle out of
Anarchist circles into larger contexts in a way that can be entirely confusing. Anarchism is the section of the library where Anarchy lives but it is also where the ideas of anarchists are stored.

Anarchy is the stuff being done, often times in the name of anarchism, usually by people who are called anarchists. The smashing of windows at various Occupies, the serving of food, the workshops, the writing of this text, are anarchy. They are doing, being, acting. One of the most potent disagreements among anarchists is about whether anarchists’ goal should be anarchism or anarchy. Should we live this potent idea now or should we concern ourselves with defining the right moment to begin? Should we be historical subjects or ahistorical actors?

Anarchistic is the broader category that does not necessarily call itself anarchist or have self-knowledge about the history of anarchism. When Anonymous strikes out on behalf of Bradley Manning, the IWW organizes service workers, or Food Not Bombs serves food they are acting anarchistically.

The reason that these words (and the associated nuanced definitions) matter enough to define is because the broad perspectives that anarchists align themselves with (prefiguration, attack, and DIY) live in the different emphases they give to these terms. Understanding these emphases begins by seeing the seams between the different positions.

**Occupy Wall Street vs the Occupy Movement**

In most of the country it has been difficult, if not impossible, to see the anarchy in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Mainstream coverage has focused on the protests seeing Wall Street™ as an evil Hegemon, on the media savvy actions of Anonymous, on the heart breaking stories of The 99%, on the abuses of the NYPD or UCD (or other) police. The media does what the media does: it tells a story that isn't true but that is calming, aimed at someone who feels powerless and needs to be assured that there is indeed “nothing to see here, move along.”

The Occupy Wall Street movement has its own mythology: a story about how the middle class has lost their leaders in Washington and their way in the halls of finance capitalism. It is a timely story but not a particularly anarchist one. It is a story about economic injustice rather than about rejection of the dominant social order. It begs to be bought off by a politician willing to play rhetorical ball or whatever celebrity is in town. (That said, the main Occupy Wall Street site does use hyperbolic language that is uncommon outside of anarchist circles.)

The Occupy Movement exceeds the Occupy Wall Street movement. It predates it by years and will live beyond it. The Occupy Movement has a much more explicitly anarchist composition and disposition. The idea of occupation as an expression of a particular political perspective is as old as politics⁴ itself. Taking space is powerful when it is the mass of workers taking their factory back from the owners, citizens taking civic space for a rally, or the squatter taking an unused building to live.

In a world with more than seven billion people the occupation of space couldn’t be a more political act. But what does it mean? Does it mean that we are running out of space or that taking space isn't about physical space at all, but about power?

*People have often reproached me for these spatial obsessions, which have indeed been obsessions for me. But I think through them I did come to what I had basically been looking for: the relations that are possible between power and knowledge.*  

—Foucault⁶

Biopower, or the management of human bodies, is what is being exerted when fences are put up around a formerly occupied public park or when a police officer looks into a camera and offers soundbites about how “the police are not violent but expressing the will of the people” when they beat them. The Occupy Movement is a rejection of biopower in social life.

The Occupy Movement is about a tactic that is also an expression of a position. It says “I am here, deal with it” in a way that is different from reasoned arguments about wanting this or that. So-called demands will never be as direct or open-ended because in occupation the expression is done with one’s own body. Anarchism (as the politics of the impossible) has always exceeded demands.

The Occupy Movement joined us!⁶

Are We the 99%?

Anarchists are both part of The 99% and not part of it at all. To the extent that The 99% is a populist category that includes nearly everyone, especially everyone who has never even met a member of the 1%, of course anarchists are included. To the extent to which The 99% is a political identity that will be organized (likely on behalf of the Democratic Party) in 2012, anarchists are absolutely not members.

We will explore this issue more in the section on the different strategic outlooks that anarchists bring to the Occupy Movement. For now, the general question is whether anarchists are for or against recruiting large numbers of people. Is this recruitment a precondition for anarchism? The question of our relationship to a broader movement can often be confused with the question of how broad we think the movement itself is. If your perspective is that the movement is called Occupy Wall Street and
should be framed by the issues and concerns of the General Assembly of Zuccotti Park, you have a very different view than seeing The Occupy Movement as something that extends back years and will continue beyond the tented occupations of 2011.

The Occupy Movement is Anarchist

The Occupy Movement is anarchist because in response to common challenges to social life—representation, legitimacy, and hierarchy—it chooses opposition.

Occupy Wall Street is a people’s movement. It is party-less, leaderless, by the people and for the people. It is not a business, a political party, an advertising campaign, or a brand. It is not for sale.

We wish to clarify that Occupy Wall Street is not and never has been affiliated with any established political party, candidate, or organization. Our only affiliation is with the people.

The people who are working together to create this movement are its sole and mutual caretakers. If you have chosen to devote resources to building this movement, especially your time and labor, then it is yours.

SPEAK WITH US, NOT FOR US.

Statement of Autonomy

(abridged), General Assembly at Occupy Wall Street

While opposition is simple in theory the practice is more nuanced. Anarchists, for instance, can allow representation but it is usually highly contingent, immediately revocable, and accountable to an attentive population. An example of this can be seen in the spokes councils of the Anti-Globalization Movement. Anarchists also usually allow “leadership of skills” where shoe makers (for example) are advisors—but not assumed to be infallible—in affairs of shoes.

One of the confusing things about anarchism is that anarchists disagree with each other so strenuously and vociferously. The disagreements generally fall into the categories of emphasizing history (what has anarchism meant in the past, what have anarchists done to prove themselves in history), present (how are anarchists doing things today, both failures and successes), or future (what would anarchism look like in a world that allowed it to flower?).

Naturally these three perspectives aren’t the only ones. Additionally individuals are more complicated than any classification of them. We mention these disagreements because while reading this book, it’s important to remember that anarchism is a term of tension. Most anarchists disagree with each other to such an extent that it would be easy to think that we don’t agree at all. But we do. We agree that Anarchy, the beautiful idea, is one we would like to put into practice and so we do.

This has been a boon to The Occupy Movement, because it is also about a beautiful, impossible idea that people yearn for and put time and energy into trying out.

A Brief Primer on Anarchist Political Strategies

The Occupy Movement has provided anarchists an opportunity to engage the world. This question of engagement, of strategy, comes with certain ambiguities and tensions but also with high energy. The past few years have been rich for anarchist ideas. The Occupy Movement has been a trial run for some of these ideas and a further demonstration of the validity of some of the others.

Intervention in social struggles

At Daggers Drawn

The secret is to really begin.

The present social organization is not just delaying, it is also preventing and corrupting any practice of freedom. The only way to learn what freedom is, is to experiment with it, and to do so you must have the necessary time and space.

The most visible anarchist practice of the past decade has been inspired by the idea that anarchists should directly intervene in social struggles with the intention of increasing the tension of those struggles. Another way to put this is that the best way to practice anarchy is to do it in places where there are social, political, and existential pressures. In this way, anarchist desire for freedom can turn a situation—that would otherwise be a political opportunity for some or a place for compromise for others—into a break. This break may be a personal cognitive break, a social break from convention, or a complete break from politics or business as usual.

This general perspective could be called insurrectionary anarchism, and it is not a strategic one. It doesn’t say that the Revolution (or Insurrection) require such and such elements (and then rewrite history to confirm the assertion). Instead this is an attitude that attack should be anarchists’ generalized activity, not a step-by-step plan, political development, or strategic activity at all.

The State of capital will not “wither away,” as it seems many anarchists have come to believe—not only entrenched in abstract positions of “waiting,” but some even openly condemning the acts of those for whom the creation of the new world depends on the destruction of the old. At-
tack is the refusal of mediation, pacification, sacrifice, accommodation, and compromise. —“Some Notes on Insurrectionary Anarchism”

In the Occupy Movement this interventionist perspective can be seen most clearly in the West Coast actions around the port closures in December and the General Strike of Oakland November 2. It can also be seen in the general motion towards occupying buildings as an obvious “next step” in the movement as a whole.

Prefiguration

For anarchists, this boils down to engaging in prefigurative politics: the idea that there should be an ethically consistent relationship between the means and ends. Means and ends aren’t the same, but anarchists utilize means that point in the direction of their ends. They choose actions or projects based on how these fit into longer-term aims. Anarchists participate in the present in the ways that they would like to participate, much more fully and with much more self-determination, in the future — and encourage others to do so as well. Prefigurative politics thus aligns one’s values to one’s practice and practices the new society before it is fully in place. —Anarchism and Its Aspirations

A consistent anarchist strategy has been the idea that a better world can be built “in the shell of the old.” This idea is particularly appealing because it gives one a task to do now (build the new world), a goal (the new world to be built), and allows one to imagine that the necessary conflict will not happen until the new world, and its creators, are prepared for it.

The Occupy Movement has been a rich environment for this thinking along a couple different lines. First, the practice of using General Assemblies and consensus, or near-consensus, decision making is itself a model of how disparate groups of people could work together. Moreover this decision making, along with the work around self-organization, can be described positively as direct democracy. If a small amount of direct democracy is good, and makes those involved feel like they are experiencing a functioning kind of freedom, it isn’t bad logic to think that more would be better. This is the argument for prefiguring a better world by practicing it today. It is similar to t’ai chi. Move slowly and deliberately today when you are just learning the moves so that when the time is right you are ready to move swiftly and smoothly.

Class Struggle

The strength of certain anarchist critiques of capital is to be found in their location of diffuse and complex power relations as being the materia-

Class-struggle anarchism has been the most visible and articulate anarchist strategic perspective for the past hundred years. Class-struggle anarchists believe that a rupture of the existing order will only occur as a conflict, perhaps even a war, between workers (as a class) and owners. By and large, class-struggle anarchists have been ambivalent towards the Occupy Movement as a whole and particularly towards the sloppy class rhetoric of the 99%. The criticism of this term is that The 99% do not have a workplace from which to strike nor the ability to self-organize in any meaningful way. As a result, it is just a populist notion, one that works well as a bumper-sticker or as a humanist cheer, but not as an effective way to organize a movement against the existing capitalist system.

As indicated by the above, class-struggle anarchists, whether they be anarcho-communists, anarcho-syndicalists, or platformists, tend to do the most strategic thinking of all anarchists, and if events do not reflect that strategic thinking, then the time must not be right. So they have largely continued struggles and work that they were doing prior to the Fall of 2011, in lieu of getting involved in the Occupy Movement.

That said, the class-struggle analysis has been influential to all anarchist involvement in the Occupy Movement. It is fair to say that much of the popular support of the Occupy Movement has been due to how it expresses the rage that people feel towards austerity measures that have been implemented since the economic downturn of 2008, along with the frustration that many people feel about their future as workers.

You cannot be at an occupation event without recognizing the severity of the economic situation from two directions: first, the middle class is being violently dismantled, but has been so existentially compromised over the past sixty years that it doesn’t have the tools to imagine what “another world” or even what effective action would look like, and secondly, all of the people who are victims of second and third generation poverty have no resources and little power to do anything but survive. The Occupy Movement has given a new vocabulary to the experience of what Marxists call the unorganized working class, the lumpenproletariat or the precariat.

Practical Anarchism

While perhaps not a strategic perspective, it is likely that a preponderance of self-identified anarchists believe that anarchism is synony-
mous with doing anarchism. These are the anarchists who cook, serve, and clean. The ones who sit in the meetings, coordinate trainings, and ensure that all the disparate and under-represented voices are heard. They may not see the Occupy Movement as a way to transform society, because for them transforming society is indistinguishable from their daily activities of doing anarchy.

I'm here to help create a better world free of authoritarian structures, government, capitalism, etc.

I am an anarchist. I believe the system is not working for the 99% not on the top and that there is no simple quick fix. It's not about bad apples or legislation. We need to create a new way of living to ensure significant lasting change. —New York anarchist Occupier

Practical anarchism is not ideological. It accepts the basic premises of anarchist theory, but quickly moves on (in classic American style) to doing stuff. From the start of the Occupy Movement practical anarchists have been on the ground—notably in Zuccotti Park and Oscar Grant Plaza, but also at nearly every camping Occupy event—doing the work. While they are not the writers of essays and manifestos nor the creators of photo ops, they demonstrate the essence of anarchist non-hierarchical and decentralized practice of anarchy. Practical anarchist projects have served thousands of meals, built hundreds of shelters (at least), found thousands of dollars' worth of supplies, organized child care and health care, done conflict resolution, and in various other ways turned what could have been the health and human disaster of public camping into real successes (at least until police forces shut things down).

The different strategic outlooks of the anarchist participants of the Occupy Movement will be further developed in their own words throughout the book.

Criticism

This is a book about anarchist involvement in the Occupy Movement. It is about the ways that anarchists have engaged with the movement, on its terms and on ours. It should come as no surprise that there are additional categories of anarchist involvement with the Occupies, which are either none (neutrality), or explicit hostility. A primary concern that anarchists had, from day one, was the disconcerting attitude that many people in the Occupy Wall Street movement had toward the police. This was best demonstrated by the phrase “The police are part of The 99%,” a phrase also problematic for the way it simplifies the conflicts in society (between an undifferentiated mass—the 99%—on the one side and a faceless elite—the 1%—on the other). This has made it impossible to differentiate targets and goals for Occupy. Anarchists tend not to care much for the middle class worried about losing their privilege, and also don't identify with right-wing concerns about the Federal Reserve, 9/11, or other sensational mythologies.

Other anarchist criticisms of Occupy movement have to do with its specifically liberal, white, and mass movement orientation. These raise a central question for anarchists: how do we establish criteria for our involvement in mainstream society?

On the one hand we have the masters of this world who dictate the terms of our survival and on the other we have real human needs that aren't being met. There is a certain ahistorical realpolitik to this perspective. The masters of this world were not dropped here by aliens. The people who rule the world, whether they are called the owning class, the bosses, the rulers, or the 1%, took the things (land, money, resources) that they have and control. They took the land and resources on this continent from the 500 nations who shared it before they were here. They take from the rest of us every day. This taking is called profit, ownership, and Manifest Destiny. It is also the name, no matter what term you use, of the central violence at the heart of society, of civilization.

Terms like “occupation” and “colonization” have a rich, unsavory history. The movement we call Occupy is an attempt to rewrite that history in the name of the people who live on and work the land. It would be a shame if the Occupy Movement didn't have the space to understand the history of these terms and how the problems we are talking about today were by and large founded on the colonization of yesterday.

The problem with arguing terminology is that it can easily become the central point of disagreement rather than a place of struggle within broader struggles of land, body, and society.

How to Read This Book

This is a book that can be read in one of two ways. It is intended to be read from front to back; from history through the events of 2011 and on to criticism. But it can also be read in pieces, from one entertaining moment to the next. A surreal reading may be a more honest one, since a set of writings that includes Wolfi Landstreicher and Cindy Milstein (only two of the included writers who come from dramatically different perspectives on anarchy) cannot be taken too seriously.

This is a book that could be read entirely as voices from the void—as a sizable portion is either attributed to anonymous authorship or to obvious noms de plume. Anarchists have a critique of hierarchy, authority,
and specialization. Authorship can be seen as all three.

The Occupy Movement has been a milestone for anarchist involvement in the popular consciousness. Yes, anarchism is still a boogeyman in the mainstream news and popular imagination but it also has a face and more-or-less positive reputation for thousands of people: a human face at a meeting, at a protest, and on the front lines of this time.

If we have succeeded, then this book will demonstrate that beyond the protests or the camping occupations anarchists are seriously engaged with every aspect of the Occupy Movement and the society that requires it. Anarchists are engaging with the theory, tactics, and social consequences of this movement and want this discussion to be open. We want everyone to be participating in it. This book is an attempt to bring this discussion to everyone and not just keep it on our websites and our journals.

Join us!

End Notes
1. Like many other terms used in this book, the term “movement” is a coded and complicated one. If the term is read in a positive light it implies that people have found a voice, that that voice is against the existing order of things, and that it is shouting from a discernible direction. This is not true as there are more than competing factions involved in the activities of the past few years. In fact most people involved likely do not see themselves as part of the same chorus at all—or even singing a song. Their participation is contingent on survival, on boredom, on the fashion of the moment, on what they will get out of winning, on what they will lose by losing.

To put this another way many anarchists reject the term “movement” as representing the kind of business as usual thinking and energy that the term pretends to contest.
3. To quote from http://occupywallst.org/ as of December 2011:
We Are The 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%. We are using the revolutionary Arab Spring tactic to achieve our ends and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximize the safety of all participants.

This #Occupy Wall Street movement empowers real people to create real change from the bottom up. We want to see a general assembly in every backyard, on every street corner because we don’t need Wall Street and we don’t need politicians to build a better society.
4. “Politics” is another term of tension. On the one hand it is a general term that should be a useful way to talk about the practice of taking power in our lives but
The pieces chosen for this section tell a story about the origins of the Occupation Movement through its anarchist pedigree. It starts in the 19th century with Jewish immigrants in NYC, passes through the squatters of Amsterdam in the 1980s, the student occupation movement of 2009, and then a snapshot of the Indignados movement of the Summer of 2011: from Syntagma square in Athens, Greece, and from Barcelona, Spain.
From Tsarist Russia to Zuccotti Park:

the Paradox of Anarchism

by Thai Jones

At the end of a long day of peaceful demonstrations in Oakland this past November, a few hundred protesters—many wearing masks or covering their faces with bandanas—massed for a night of rage, smashing windows, chucking rocks and sparking bonfires. In the aftermath, the city's police chief described the perpetrators as "generally anarchists and provocateurs."

Across the continent, in New York City, I joined more than 1,000 protesters in a march from Zuccotti Park to police headquarters to express our solidarity with the people of Oakland. In front of the grim, brick facade of 1 Police Plaza, we created a human microphone, relaying speeches, sentence by sentence, to those crowded behind us. When audience members agreed with a speaker's sentiments, they performed a gesture of approval, wagging their fingers above their heads. For disagreement, there was an even simpler expedient: We just refused to repeat the words, shutting off the microphone.

These two rituals of protest have largely defined the national Occupy Wall Street movements: on the one hand, tetchy and often violent confrontations with the police; on the other, a democratic commitment to true consensus. These also happen to be the hallmarks of anarchism, a political philosophy with roots dating to the 18th century, which is currently experiencing its widest florescence in the United States in nearly 100 years.

Jews were deeply involved in the movement's previous heyday. In the 1880s and '90s, immigrants from Russia or Eastern Europe carried their anarchist beliefs with them to New York City. "Among Jewish radicals," Vivian Gornick writes in a recent biography of Emma Goldman, "none were more dynamic than the anarchists, who in their unaccommodating view of capitalist reality often struck the note most emotionally satisfying." In 1890, the anarchist periodical Freie Arbeiter Stimme—the Free Voice of Labor—began publishing in Yiddish. (In 1898, this newspaper's forebear, the Forverts, was referred to by The New York Times as "the Anarchistic organ.") And by the turn of the 20th century, New York City's Lower East Side was an international center of the movement, boasting such world-renowned Jewish anarchist leaders as Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and a host of others. "They were revolted by the entire ethic of capitalism that they found here in the United States," historian Paul Avrich has said. "So what they did was to replace this world with a counter world—American culture with a counter culture—and they began to establish their whole anarchist culture."

But for most Americans, anarchy was—and remains—just a synonym for chaos. "Bombs and anarchists are inseparable in the minds of most of us," a journalist wrote 100 years ago. "Mysterious destroyers of life and property, merciless men [sic] who have pledged their lives or their knives or their guns to some nefarious cause or another."

From the 1880s until the Russian Revolution, the anarchist assassin was a cultural archetype that could be found in the pages of the penny press or the novels of Joseph Conrad, Henry James, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Responsible for the deaths of tsars, prime ministers, and presidents, these radicals posed a terrifying threat to established authority. In societies such as tsarist Russia, where civil rights hardly existed, they turned to violence as the only possible form of protest. When they imported these tactics to the West, American and European leaders reacted in panic. "When compared with the suppression of anarchy, every other question sinks into insignificance," Theodore Roosevelt warned Congress during his presidency. "The anarchist is the enemy of humanity, the enemy of all mankind."

As the great majority of the Occupy Wall Street participants will attest, however, anarchism is no more inherently violent than any other political idea. From the Greek root an-arkhos—without a leader—the idea merely poses the ideal that self-government is government enough. Of all the many philosophies that emerged from the Enlightenment, it is the purest and most hopeful. Its tenets rest on the assumption that humanity is perfectible, that all can prosper, that each is worthy of trust.

It is a tradition that found a comfortable home in America, where Henry David Thoreau was an anarchist avant la lettre, as were so many other pioneering and self-sufficient citizens in the nation's history.

The heyday of American anarchism began in 1886, when four practitioners of the philosophy were executed after a bomb had killed eight police officers during a rally in Chicago's Haymarket Square. In 1901, President McKinley was assassinated by a disturbed young anarchist. Immigration from Eastern Europe and Russia brought a generation of notorious anarchist leaders, many of whom were Jewish: Johann Most, Berkman and—
most notorious of all—Goldman. Together they built a mass following, traveling the country and speaking to crowds of thousands.

But the Russian Revolution rendered the movement largely irrelevant. The Bolsheviks’ success was a triumph of hierarchy that seemed to discredit anarchist notions of consensus and debate. Within a few years, communism had supplanted anarchism as the font of all American political paranoia. During the succeeding decades, the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States largely divided left and right into opposing camps. But the end of the Cold War brought a final disillusionment with Soviet-style state socialism, and opened a new possibility for anarchist organizing and practice. This was first seen in this country during the anti-globalization movement of the 1990s.

Historically, anarchism has been most appealing to those who, like Jewish radicals in Russia, found themselves without any representation. Unskilled laborers shunned by the organized trade union movement, the homeless and unemployed—these were the constituency for the ideas of its orators. If today’s participants in the Occupation movement feel themselves to be politically unrepresented, if they find that their concerns and ideas do not get voiced within the two-party system, then it is little surprise that they are participating in that same tradition.

The past two months of the Occupy Wall Street movement have revealed the exhilarating potential of anarchism as a practical form of governance. At Zuccotti Park, and in the other encampments nationwide, discussions as picayune as the proper management of laundry and as significant as the philosophical implications of civil disobedience were conducted through improvised methods of participatory democracy.

Yet, this time has also been marked repeatedly by violence. As in the past, the preponderance of force has been used by the police—most spectacularly in their military-style raids on Zuccotti Park and the encampment in Oakland. The movement has moved into a new phase now, but confrontations between authorities and occupiers may continue. The likelihood of further bloodshed rises as a chilling possibility.

This generation of anarchists again faces a dilemma that challenged their predecessors. It is a question that puzzled Jack London, the novelist, a century ago. “Of all paradoxes,” he wrote then, “is there one that will exceed the paradox of our anarchists—men and women who are so temperamentally opposed to violence that they are moved to deeds of violence in order to bring about, in the way they conceive it, the reign of love and cosmic brotherhood?”

Squatting in the Beginning
by ADILKNO

In the middle of the city, amid the concrete shapes of the daily tedium, you stepped into a space of unlimited possibilities. The point was not to create something new, but to use the old to depart for somewhere else:

“Oscar, Wouter, Bear and I knew each other from the Stuttel Bar, where we spent the evening when we had nothing better to do. We were all looking for a place to live and squatting seemed like fun. Oscar had seen an empty house in the Spuistraat. That was nearby, so after an evening in the Stuttel we went to have a look. We looked at the corner building after I’d kicked in the door and were enthusiastic about the space. The next day we got hold of some mattresses and blankets. We slept in the building next door, which we’d also found empty when we entered this house on the roof via the window and gutter.

After further exploration over the roof, the four of us found out we had a gigantic complex at our disposal, with all kinds of weird-looking rooms where here and there the lights were still on. We intended to keep it among friends, so that you’d always meet people in the building who you knew and who had the same attitude—I mean we thought living was something subordinate; that you have fun is much more important. We picked out the best rooms and bombarded the NRC into a “general gaming den.” The former NRC Handelsblad building, now legalized, rent-paying and renovated, is still a landmark, and an empty section of it was resquatted in 1991 after sitting empty for too long.

That was the squat experience: that behind a kicked-open door an incredibly large complex could be found, with here and there “the lights still on.” Even stronger, it was the only thing the assembled squatters had in common. Squatting formed not a historical mission, but an extra-historic space with as fourth dimension the play. It offered sensory sensations. Entry into it was of a violence which could only be conjured up through a fixed series of actions.

The first thing done after the squat was to repair the door, put in your own lock; a prefab cardboard renovation door was immediately replaced by its massive, solid wood predecessor. This replacement of the door was a consequence of the fact that breaking open the door was the only prosecutable action, but it was also the confirmation of the building’s being excerpted from Cracking the Movement
put into use. The key to the new lock made the house, which initially had only been broken into, into your own home.

The door was in short not only part of a rite of passage, but also of the protection of your own existence. Even if the space to be squatted was full of drafty holes, if the window was open, the door was the magic point around which the squat proper organized itself. While the house often remained minimally furnished for weeks, the door was equipped with the most elaborate accessories, from builders' props to armorplate. Even if the building was legalized, a strict door ritual might be observed for years after. The door, which in open society was declared trash, was rediscovered, and even when squatters went breaking through walls and tearing down portals, they stayed friendly with the door. It did multifunctional service as tabletop, bed, back wall, barricade material, shield, or was put away for awhile in the meantime.

Everyone places the beginning and end of “the squat movement” somewhere else. This is because everyone stepped into the collective space at a different place. For one this happened with the breaking open of the door to his or her own flat, for the other while wandering around in the immeasurable emptiness of the complexes which were squatted city-wide. Every squat can point to the place where she or he personally crossed the threshold and stepped inside a collective space. Something happened which was qualitatively different from “standing up for your housing rights” or “resistance against the repression of the state,” something other than the unleashing of the rage built up over the years over speculation and failing policy.

inside the space of squatting there was no talk of historical development; as it wandered it only cropped up in more and more places, to the strangest out-of-the-way corners of the city. After entry came the surprise that there were so many more people in the same place, just as crazy as you, just as radical, just as amateurish. Surprise over the cool face managed to get inside a committee meeting went afterward to go find Breeze blocks; today’s heavy was tomorrow’s super nerd. Standing face to face “managed to get inside a committee meeting went afterward to go find Breeze blocks; today’s heavy was tomorrow’s super nerd. Standing face to face” managed to get inside a committee meeting went afterward to go find Breeze blocks; today’s heavy was tomorrow’s super nerd. Standing face to face

Historic conditions? Causes? Result? Just yell. “No one had a house and that was really mean!” Unused spaces were, through a small forgetfulness in the law, there for the using, without the owner being able to start anything with the law in hand against the anonymous users. Fortunately too was that owners and city planners, through their naive belief in property rights and authority, let their houses endlessly sit vacant, even when plenty had already been squatted: “Homes for the homeless!”

The first group, mostly students who grouped around the handymen, had originally taken a look around in leftist circles, but these turned out to speak a language you couldn’t do anything with. Analyses of society, self-realization, future planning, changing the world and yourself, strategic debates, marching through institutions or lecture notes, social responsibility, conscious security, relationship discussions, ideals, big stories: it had become unbearable...

They couldn’t find the energy anymore to wait any longer for the change in the other’s mentality and the fruits of working on yourself. “The crisis of Marxism is not ours.” The taboo on the immediate realization of the democratized desires had created a discussion culture around emancipation and integration. University council work had become the training ground for the meeting culture in the institutions of the future. When you refused to march any longer on this prescribed route, it was a question of logic that political business as a whole was written off. The aversion against the left, of whom something was still expected, became
as great as that against the right, which you wanted nothing to do with anyway. The terms began to lose their meaning.

The handymen had another view of things. The ex-democrats among them saw from their political viewpoint the squat wave as an opposition to the vacancy law, which had to be averted or changed. That was their trip. A second group, unconscious Leninists, brought the banner down from the attic: "The worst of all are the rightists disguised as leftists. They're worse than the rest—avoid them like the plague." That slogan too fell outside the space experience of the fresh squatters; every political current was, when push came to shove, part of "their" parliamentary democracy. Making social conflicts manageable wasn't our problem. No one dreamed of revolution or strove for the general good. One's own housing problem was much simpler to solve.

The term "politics" had been denied its monopoly on the public sphere by feminist criticism and since then penetrated to the most intimate places. Everything quickly became political and the word thereby lost its action-inspiring charm. The squat contribution to the waning political culture limited itself to screaming, smoke bombs, stolen documents and scale models set ablaze. The "primacy of politics" would be replaced by the robust term "power," but by that time the squatters had already abandoned the intellectual atmosphere in order to explore, in place of French theory, their own space.

The idea of politics as goal-oriented action, as feasibility research, was also held at a distance. Social opponents were not addressed; there was no realistic ideal over which to negotiate. "Parking garages = war." This anarchism born of practice fused with that narcissism that belongs to everyone who takes a place that cannot be found inside society. Without realizing it, the inalienable right to one's own local experience was discovered. This anarchism, a combination of rage, self-pity, and being right ("They can tear down our house, but not our ideals") turned out to be the fuel with which local space travel could be driven.

Squatting's appeal was that it offered no alternative, no view of a better world that had to legitimize and argue itself. No one spoke for anyone. "We won't leave" was not a demand but an announcement. No consensus, no compromise, no discussion. Anyone could step into the noncommittal atmosphere to do their thing. You lived amid the remnants and ruins of an order that had become alien in one fell swoop. It was no accident that preference went to ramshackle houses, scrap autos, war-era leather jackets, furniture found on the street. Everything that had been cast off and thus ended up outside the traffic of society existed, as it were, by definition in the "outside system" to which the squats granted shelter. And everything which defined itself within, respectable efficiency stood outside it.

No one thought in strategies, principles. Abstract theoretical terms were taboo. The ideas were not words but things: steel planking, rocks, actions. "They" were thought of in terms of interiors to dismantle, destroyable riot vans, outposts, and whatever else came along. There was also no ideology. The question was how? and never why?

_We've begun already to live how it's good, and let their laws disturb us as little as possible. And we fight against injustice. And that they don't like! It's okay to talk in the meantime. But living by the old Dutch saying, 'Not words but deeds!' isn't allowed._

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_We are the Crisis:_

_a Report on the California Occupation Movement_

by anonymous

I. Like A Winter With A Thousand Decembers

In Greece, they throw molotovs in the street. For every reason under
the sun: in defense of their friends, to burn down the state, for old time's
sake, for the hell of it, to mark the death of a kid the cops killed for no
reason. For no reason. They light Christmas trees on fire. _December is the
new May_. They smash windows, they turn up paving stones, they fight the
cops because their future went missing, along with the economy, a few
years ago. They occupy buildings to find one another, to be together in
the same place, to have a base from which to carry out raids, to drink and
fuck, to talk philosophy. The cops smash into packs of their friends on
motorbikes. They hold down the heads of their friends on the pavement
and kick them in the face.

In Ssangyong, one thousand laid-off workers occupy an auto factory.
They line up in formation with metal pipes, white helmets, red bandanas.
Three thousand riot cops can't get them out of their factory for seventy-
seven days. They say they're ready to die if they have to, and in the mean-
time they live on balls of rice and boiled rain. Beseiged by helicopters,
toxic tear gas, 50,000 volt guns, they fortify positions on the roof, con-
structing catapults to fire the bolts with which they use to build cars.

In Santiago, insurrectionary students mark the 40th anniversary of
Pinochet's coup by attacking police stations and shutting down the Uni-
versidad Academia de Humanismo Cristiano for ten days. _No more deaths_
will be accepted, all will be avenged. In France, a couple of “agitators” dump a bucket of shit over the President of Université Reuines 2, as he commemorates the riots of the 2006 anti-CPE struggle with a two-minute public service announcement for corporate education. The video goes up on the web. It drops into slow motion as they flee the mezzanine after the action, not even masked. It’s easy, it’s light, it’s obvious. How else could one respond? What more is there to say? We know your quality policy. A cloud of thrown paper breaks like confetti in the space above the crowd below—a celebratory flourish. The video cuts to the outside of a building, scrawled with huge letters: Vive la Commune.

In Vienna, in Zagreb, in Freiburg—in hundreds of universities across central and eastern Europe—students gather in the auditoriums of occupied buildings, holding general assemblies, discussing modalities of self-determination. They didn’t used to pay fees. Now they do. Before the vacuum of standardization called the Bologna Process, their education wasn’t read off a pan-European fast food menu. Now it is. Fuck that, they say. They call themselves The Academy of Refusal. They draw lines in the sand. We will stay in these spaces as long as we can, and we will talk amongst ourselves, learn what we can learn from one another, on our own, together. We will take back the time they have stolen from us, that they’ll continue to steal, and we’ll take it back all at once, here and now. In the time that we have thus spared, one of the things we will do is make videos in which we exhibit our wit, our beauty, our sovereign intelligence, and our collective loveliness, and we’ll send them to our comrades in California, Madrid, Paris, and Moscow.

In California, the kids write Occupy Everything on the walls. Demand Nothing, they write. They turn over dumpsters and wedge them into the doorways of buildings with their friends locked inside. Outside, they throw massive Electro Communist dance parties. They crowd by the thousands around occupied buildings, and one of them rests her hand upon the police barriers. A cop tells her to move her hand. She says: “no.” He obliterates her finger with a baton. She has reconstructive surgery in the morning and returns to defend the occupation in the afternoon. We Are the Crisis, they say. They start blogs called Anti-Capital Projects; We Want Everything; Like Lost Children, the better to distribute their communiqués and insurrectionary pamphlets. Ergo, really living communism must be our goal, they write. We Have Decided Not to Die, they whisper. Students in Okinawa send them letters of solidarity signed Project Disagree. Wheeler, Kerr, Mrak, Dutton, Campbell, Kresge, Humanities 2...the names of the buildings they take become codewords. They relay, resonate, communicate. Those who take them gather and consolidate their forces by taking more. They gauge the measure of their common power. They know, immediately, that if they do not throw down, that if they do not scatter their rage throughout the stolid corridors of their universities, that if they do not prove their powers of negation, if they do not affirm their powers of construction, they will have failed their generation, failed the collective, failed history.

But why wouldn’t they throw down, and scatter, and prove, and negate, and affirm? After all, what the fuck else is there to do?

II. September, October, November

A particular political sequence is always at once discrete and continuous, at once a singularity and a relay. And the series of militant occupations that would sweep the state in November both emerged from and exploded the limits of a political conjuncture with parameters that were established in September.

On September 24, the first day of the fall quarter at most UC campuses, a faculty-organized walkout over the handling of the budget crisis during the summer erupted into the largest coordinated protest in the history of the University of California. At UC Berkeley, over five thousand people flooded Sproul Plaza. On the same day, two occupation attempts at UC Santa Cruz and UC Berkeley would result in markedly different outcomes. At UCSC, a group of over twenty students successfully locked down and occupied the Graduate Student Commons for a full week, throwing massive Electro Communist dance parties in the open space of Covell Commons below the balcony, issuing online communiqués that would circulate internationally, and putting the incipient California “student movement” on the map of radical circles around the world. The slogans on their banners resonated because the collective “we” in whose name they spoke recognized itself therein, saw itself captured, concretized, enacted, redistributed in their terse formulæ, their unabashed desire for totality, their articulation of an urgency at once symptomatic and prescriptive: “We Want Everything”; “We Are The Crisis.”

At UC Berkeley, a more ambitious occupation attempt would fail on the same night that UCSC succeeded. Having arrived with equipment to lock down the doors, a group called for the Berkeley General Assembly—a mass gathering of some 300 people on the evening after the walkout—to occupy Wheeler Hall. Despite drawing wide spontaneous support from the assembly when they read the occupation statement from Santa Cruz, any effort to bring their proposed action to a vote was interminably stalled, and a subsequent decision to force the issue by locking down the majority of doors in the building resulted in a tense and protracted conflict between those who viewed the occupation attempt as a “vanguardist” affront to procedural consensus and those who viewed it as an effort to seize an important opportunity for collective direct action. The standoff continued until police walked into the building and cut through the locks some ninety minutes later.
The split within the Wheeler auditorium that night, and the split within the broader UC movement as to how the occupation at Santa Cruz was regarded, would largely shape both the discourse and the practical possibilities of the mobilization over the next month and a half. While a second, brief occupation at UCSC on October 14 would establish the tactic as a constant threat on UC campuses, partisans of slow and steady movement building decried such actions as irresponsible adventurism. This was an antagonism that would persist throughout the fall—a familiar split between “Trotskyist” and “ultra-leftist” orientations within the movement, the former holding fast to the supposedly democratic framework of General Assemblies while the second insisted that actions themselves were the means through which the movement was both organized and pushed forward.

While a massive organizing conference on October 24 would call for a statewide “Day of Action” on March 4, a small group of UC Berkeley graduate students—not content to wait until the spring semester to act—launched a website and signature page calling for an indefinite student, staff, and faculty strike beginning on Nov. 18, when the UC Regents would meet in UCLA to vote on a proposed 32% student fee increase. It’s notable that although this call for mass action was most actively pushed forward by many of the same people who had attempted the occupation of Wheeler on Sept. 24, it was also supported by representatives of the same groups that had most vocally opposed it. But even if the antagonism within the movement that had emerged through October and early November would not be entirely displaced by the events that unfolded during the week of the strike, at least the tedium of ideological playfighting would be.

On Nov. 18 and 19, thousands of protesters from across the state clashed with riot cops outside the Regents meetings at UCLA, chasing the Regents back to their cars as they were escorted from the building. The protests were met with a repressive police response, including taser attacks and eighteen arrests over two days. On the evening of Nov. 18, an occupation attempt at Berkeley would be foiled for the second time, when a team of about forty attempted to lock down the Architects and Engineers building—home of Capital Projects, Real Estate Services, and the Office of Sustainability. Forced to abandon their attempt when administrators locked themselves in their offices, the group nonetheless succeeded in drawing strong support from a crowd that gathered outside the building, and the aftershocks of that spontaneous solidarity would make themselves felt two days later. Later that night at UCLA, a group of forty students occupied Campbell Hall, successfully locking down the doors with impressive barricades and holding the building for over twenty-four hours before abandoning the occupation on the morning of the 20th. On the afternoon of the 19th, UC Santa Cruz students, already holding down Kresge Townhall, escalated their occupation by storming the main administration building. They held Kerr Hall for three days, locking it down after their demands were rejected on the night of the 21st, and vacating the building without charges after it was raided by police the following morning. At UC Davis, about fifty students marched into Mrak Hall on the afternoon of the 19th, their numbers rising to one hundred fifty through the afternoon, with dozens of supporters outside the doors. Eight hours and sixty riot cops later, fifty-two arrests ensued when those inside refused police orders to disperse. After spending the night at Yolo County Jail, they drove back to campus and occupied another building the next day, taking Dutton Hall for eight hours with a group of over one hundred, forcing the administration to call in riot police again before walking away.

In a word: between Nov 18 and Nov. 22 a “movement” became an occupation movement. But even in the midst of this explosive sequence, with its clear affirmation of tactical solidarity across campuses, no one could have anticipated the rupture that occurred at Wheeler Hall on Nov. 20.

III. Vortex: Wheeler

At 6:38 am on Friday morning, a post went up on Facebook:

UC Berkeley is Occupied. Wheeler Hall has been taken by students after Thursday’s vote by the UC Regents to increase fees by over 32%. After two days of marches, protests and rallies, students have locked down the doors against campus police while supporters have surrounded the building.

At 6:38 am, the last item of this report was an effort at self-fulfilling prophecy. In fact, only a few dozen supporters clustered around one side of the huge neo-classical building at the center of the Berkeley campus, watching the windows. But twelve hours later, when police finally broke through the occupiers’ barricades, citing forty people for misdemeanor trespassing and then releasing them without cuffs, they were greeted by a cheering, lamplit crowd of some two thousand people who had packed around police barriers all day.

In between, everything swirled in around the still edifice of Wheeler. An occupation is a vortex, not a protest. Shortly after it had been locked down in the morning, police broke into the basement floor, beating and arresting three students on trumped-up felony charges. Occupiers then retreated to the second floor, barricading hallway doors with chairs, tables, truck tie-downs, U-locks, and ropes, and tirelessly defending the doors against the cops throughout the day. Outside, students pulled fire alarms, cancelling classes and vacating most of the buildings on campus. Support flowed to the occupation, drawn in part by the massive and disproportional police presence that gathered throughout the morning and swelled to hundreds of riot cops by the afternoon. Inside the building, police snarled threats at those on the other side—get ready...
for your beat-down—and pounded against the doors in a frustrated effort to break through the interior blockade. Outside—holding their ground against police attacks as the cops set up metal barriers around the building—thousands of students effectively laid siege to the building. Or rather, they laid siege to the besiegers.

There were various powers of resistance. Across the pedestrian corridor on the west side of the building, students and workers formed a hard blockade, sometimes a dozen rows deep, preventing any passage throughout much of the afternoon. On the hour, many students attempted to organize rushes against police lines around the perimeter, timed by the tolling of the bell-tower and organized by runners between corners of the building. At around 4:00 pm, a column of sixteen riot police lined up at the southeast corner of Wheeler, marching toward the backs of the students and workers amassed at the barriers. A gathering crowd, drawn by cell phone communications and twitter feeds, fanned out to surround the advancing column, blockading a path along the east side of the building and locking arms around the cops until they charged a weak point in the chain, beating one student on the ground with batons and shooting another in the stomach with a rubber bullet. When later in the afternoon it became clear that the police would eventually break down the barricades on the second floor, self-organizing groups took up tactical positions at all possible points of exit—even those reportedly accessible by underground tunnels—blockading the loading bays of an adjacent building with dumpsters and forming a human barricade across the doors of Doe Library to the north of Wheeler.

To turn the campus into a militarized warzone was the choice of the administration and the police; but it was also an implicit taunt, a challenge from which students and workers refused to back down, making it obvious that they would not allow the occupiers to be spirited away to jail in handcuffs without a potentially explosive confrontation. As Berkeley grad student George Ciccariello-Mahler’s particularly canny account of the day put it: “Let this be clear: if the students were arrested and carried out, there was going to be a fight. A riot? Perhaps (this much depended on the police). A fight? Mos def.”

This commitment of the crowd outside the occupation entailed a slight displacement that was audible in the chants of the crowd: from “Whose University?! Our University!” to “Who owns Wheeler?! We own Wheeler!” “Wheeler” is the proper name of this displacement, because the building that it designates became—in an unexpected instant stretched out through a morning, an afternoon, an evening—the site of a displacement of the opposition between a mass movement and the supposedly vanguardist tactic hitherto perceived as the fetish of a few ultra-left adventurists. A displacement, not a fusion. These poles persisted in pockets among the crowd, but their conflict was simply not what mattered on that day. Whether or not all interested parties might choose to describe the event in these terms, what happened was that a “we” numbering two thousand, surrounding the perimeter of Wheeler Hall, declared collective ownership not just of the “University” (an abstraction), but of a particular building, a concrete instantiation of university property. And when this happened the priority of factionalist politics that had defined the movement for the previous two months was shattered by the immediacy of an objective situation. A movement to “Save Public Education” had become indiscernible, within an unquantifiable durée, from a militant desire to communize private property.

Several of the occupiers would later refer to the “medieval” character of the tactical maneuvers that day: having retreated to an inner chamber, after their outer defenses collapsed, they ceded most of the building to the police. But the police were themselves enclosed by the barricades they had established to keep the crowd outside at bay. The space was constituted by a double barricade—by the barricades of the occupiers and the barricades of the police. This was the convoluted topology of the occupation: the space inside was opened up by being locked down (a refusal to let anyone in); the space outside was closed off by a state of siege (a refusal to let anyone out). There was an intimacy at a distance between these two spaces—the affective bond of a shared struggle—that communicated itself through the walls and through the windows, that crackled through the air around campus, that carried through a rainstorm in the early afternoon, that enabled the occupation to persist. That it was possible to hold the space inside, despite the immediate efforts of the cops to take it back: it was the concrete realization of this power that activated the energy and resistance of the crowd outside. That the material support of the crowd outside was unyielding, that it refused to be pacified or exhausted: it was this collective determination that empowered those inside to hold the doors throughout the afternoon. It became increasingly evident that the police—functioning in this case as the repressive apparatus of the administration—were effectively trapped between two zones over which they had no real control: the area outside their own barricades and the area inside the second floor doors defended by the occupiers.

This essentially powerless position—the reactive and isolated position of the police, and by extension the administration—was never more evident than at the end of the night, after the occupiers had been cited and released, after they had addressed their supporters through a megaphone, after the crowd began to disperse of their own accord. The barriers cordoning off the plaza outside Wheeler were withdrawn and the majority of the police began to file away, until two weak rows remained, guarding the building at the top of the steps, under the lights cast across
the neo-classical façade. A languid crowd began to assemble at the bottom of the steps, just standing there, aimlessly, calming staring across the unimpeded space between them and the cops. A parent walked up with two children, perhaps four and six years old, casually pointing up toward the stationary soldiers of property. Everyone might have whispered the same thing at the same time: look how small they look, how sad and out of place and ridiculous.

The illusory power of the police throughout the day was in fact the power of the people inside, the power of the people outside—the power of people, that is—to suspend the rule of property.

IV. Collateral Damage

Property is one of the knots that ties together multiple levels of the UC crisis, and that binds it with the larger crisis of the state and the global economy. Citing a 20% cut in state funding for the University, UC President Mark Yudof declared a state of “extreme fiscal emergency” in July 2009—a measure intended to legitimate and expedite a slash-and-burn approach of the administration to dealing with the budget shortfall. It has been the mantra of the UC administration over the past few years that the state is an “unreliable partner,” that the crisis of the California economy coupled with the refusal of the state government to prioritize support for public education necessitates a program of increasingly draconian cuts and austerity measures. And indeed, many within the university have accepted some version of this argument, urging students to direct blame for the crisis toward Sacramento and to acknowledge the economic “realities” of the moment: Proposition 13 has handicapped the capacity of the state to draw revenue from property taxes since 1978, and money for public services has dried up accordingly; the crisis of the university budget is part and parcel of a larger economic crisis effecting every sector in the state and taking its toll across the country. Why should the University of California claim any exceptional status?

It has become increasingly clear that such narratives don’t add up; both their credibility and plausible justifications for their acceptance slip away rapidly as one looks into the structure of the UC budget. A recent report on administrative growth by the UCLA Faculty Association “estimated that UC would have $800 million more each year if senior management had grown at the same rate as the rest of the university since 1997, instead of four times faster.” In other words, while UCOP continues to point to economic necessities and legislative priorities as the root causes of the crisis, it is a plain fact that the excessive and inexplicable growth of the administrative class itself accounts for the same amount of money—this year alone—as the budget shortfall.

Even more resonant, particularly for the occupation movement, has been the role of capital projects in the UC crisis. On August 6, the SF Chronicle reported that despite a supposed fiscal emergency that had forced layoffs, furloughs, and increased class sizes, UC had agreed to lend the state $200 million, money that would be paid back over three years at 3.2 percent interest and allocated to stalled capital projects. Money for construction projects, it seemed, was readily available where money for the educational mission of the university was not. In mid-October, Bob Meister, a UCSC Professor and President of the Council of UC Faculty Associations, published an expose’ making clear the link between proposed fee increases and capital projects: since 2004, all student fees have been pledged by UC as collateral for bonds used to fund construction projects. UC retains an excellent bond rating, superior to the state of California’s, in part because that rating is guaranteed by rising student fees. Thus, reductions to state funding actually help the UC to improve its bond rating, because while state “education funds” cannot be used as bond collateral, private student fees can—and cuts to state funding provide a pretext for increased fees. On the list of priorities driving the substitution of private for public funding, “construction,” as Meister put it, “comes ahead of instruction.”

In light of such revelations, to hold that “Sacramento” is the primary source of the UC’s woes amounts to either naivete or willful obscurantism. Not only are current reductions in state funding a drop in the bucket of UC’s total endowment—and nothing compared to the growing revenue of the university’s profit-generating wings—it is also the case that UC administration has powerful motives to both collaborate with the continuing divestment of state funding and to divert its own resources from spending on instruction. For many, this state of affairs is both obvious and unsurprising, and perhaps no one has articulated its stakes more plainly than Berkeley graduate student Annie McClanahan in an address to the UC Regents prior to their November 19 decision to pass the proposed fee increases. “I’m here today to tell you,” said McClanahan, “that when students and their parents have to borrow at 8 or 10 or 14% interest so that the UC can maintain its credit rating and its ability to borrow at a .2% lower rate of interest, we the students are not only collateral, we are collateral damage.”

V. Communization

The collateralization of student fees thus puts into question the very future of the university and the class relations it is called upon to maintain. As elsewhere in our post-industrial economy, the massive personal debt required to keep the university and its building projects churning along indicate the unsustainability of current class relations over the long-term. Something has to break. If the weakness of the American economy was, in the years leading up to the financial collapse of 2008,
exacerbated by the securitization of household debt via all kinds of exotic instruments, the situation is little different with students. UC’s bondholders bear nearly the same relationship to student borrowing as an investment bank bears to the homeowner underwater on her subprime mortgage. In both cases, the fiction of a “sound investment,” of a present sacrifice which will pay off in the future, occludes what is essentially a form of plunder, occludes a present and future immiseration which will, eventually, undermine the foundations of our consumer-driven society.

Given the UC’s propensity to favor construction over instruction, or more bluntly, buildings over people, it is hardly surprising that student activists would target those buildings as sites of resistance. The failed Berkeley occupation of Nov. 18—the first day of the strike—targeted the Capital Projects and Real-Estate services offices, departments responsible for the construction and administration of all campus buildings. The statements which the occupiers released via a blog entitled Anti-Capital Projects clarify the terms of the struggle, suggesting that what is broadly at stake are two different visions of the use of space, and by-extension, two different regimes of property. Or rather, property and its negation.

These texts fall in line with the broadly anarchist or anti-state communist perspective of the earlier occupations, in which the horizon of occupation, its project so to speak, leads far beyond the university. To the extent that occupation offers, hypothetically, the opportunity to remove a building from the regime of property—in other words, to abolish its status as “capital” and to cancel one’s subordination to owners and ownership—it forms a tactic little different than “seizure of the means of production,” one with a venerable history and a wide extension beyond the university. In particular, one thinks of workplace occupations and expropriations and housing occupations. With unemployment reaching staggering proportions and with millions of bank-owned and foreclosed homes standing empty, occupation seems like a tactic that is itself a strategy—a form of militancy that is not a means to an end but an end in and of itself.

But any such threat to property relations immediately invites conflict with the police. One also risks conflict with the larger mass of the student-worker movement and activist faculty, who are loath to extend the struggle beyond reform of the university. The radical stream within the student movement, on the other hand, sees the fight for increased access to the university as futile without situating that fight within a much broader critique of political economy. Even if achieved, present reforms of the UC will merely slow its eventual privatization, and the crisis of the university remains connected to a much larger crisis of employment and, in turn, a crisis of capitalism that permits no viable solution. In other words, the jobs for which the university ostensibly prepares its students no longer exist, even as they are asked to pony up more and more money for a devalued diploma. The pamphlet which has become a key reference for the occupation movement—Communiqué from an Absent Future—signals these positions with its title. The prospective future of the college graduate is erased by the crisis of the economy, even as any alternative future made possible through insurrection is rendered invisible by capitalist cynicism. The future is doubly absent.

The radical or anti-reformist position within the movement has often insisted upon a refusal of demands as the rationale for occupation—upon a refusal to negotiate one’s departure from the occupied building on the basis of concessions won. If any winnings are likely to be mooted, in the long-term, by overwhelming economic forces, then occupation is less potent as leverage for negotiation than as a practical attempt to remove oneself, to whatever degree possible, from existing regimes of relation to others and to the use of space. The occupiers, in this sense, refuse to “take what they can get.” They would rather “get what they can take.” (This is how some fellow travelers in New York, participants in a series of inspiring occupations last year, have put it). An occupation is not a token illegalism to be bargained away in exchange for whatever modest demands the authorities are willing to grant, since this only legitimates the existing authorities in exchange for whatever modest demands those authorities are willing to grant. Demands are always either too small or too large; too “rational” or too incoherent. Occupations themselves, however, occur as material interventions into the space and time of capitalism. They are attempts to “live communism; spread anarchy,” as the Tiqqun pamphlet Call (an influential text for the occupation movement) puts it. This slogan was written on all of the chalkboards during the Nov. 20th occupation of Wheeler.

The communiqué and some of the other texts associated with the autumn occupations link up with what is often referred to as the “communization current”—a species of utulalefism and insurrectionary anarchism that refuses all talk of a transition to communism; insisting, instead, upon the immediate formation of “communes,” of zones of activity removed from exchange, money, compulsory labor, and the impersonal domination of the commodity form. Communism, in this sense, is neither an end-point nor a goal but a process. Not a noun but a verb. There is nothing toward which one transitions, only the transition itself, only a long process of metabolizing existing goods and capitals and removing them from the regimes of property and value. Judged in relation to such a project, the occupations of the fall are modest achievements—experiments with a practice that might find a fuller implementation in the future. There is an exemplary character to the actions—they are attempts to generalize a tactic that is also a strategy, a means that is also an end, but can the tactics elaborated within the university escape its confines and become
generalized in the kinds of places—apartment buildings, factories—where they would become part of an extensive process of communization? In a sense, the byline of the movement—occupy everything, demand nothing—is prospective; it imagines itself as occurring in an insurrectionary moment which has not yet materialized. This is its strength; its ability to make an actual, material intervention in the present that fast-forwards us to an insurrectionary future. Beyond such a conflagration, there is really no escaping one’s reinscription within a series of reforms and demands, regardless of the stance one takes. Only by passing into a moment of open inscription can demands be truly and finally escaped.

The prospective dimension of the earlier positions is confirmed by the fact that both the Nov. 20th Berkeley occupation and the Santa Cruz Kerr Hall occupation, the successor occupations, did have a list of demands—demands that had a certain tactical logic in developing solidarity and expanding the action, but that also suffered from the problems of scale, coherence, and “achievability” that plague the demand as form. Nonetheless, what happened in both those instances was a massive radicalization of the student body, a massive escalation, one that was hardly countered by its superscription inside this or that call for reform. At Kerr Hall, the fact that the occupiers asked the administration for this or that concession was superseded, in material practice, by the fact that they had, for the moment, displaced their partners in negotiation: while they negotiated, they were at the same time in the Chancellor’s office, eating his food, and watching videos on his television. They did in fact get what they could take, and when the moment came, they didn’t hesitate to convert the sacrosanct property—the copy machines and refrigerators—into barricades.

VI. We are the Crisis

Some writers have concluded that the sweep of the fall’s events presents a dialectic between the “adventurist” action of small groups, and the back-footed, reactive discourse of those who want to build a “mass democratic” movement, the final synthesis of which can be found in the “mass actions” undertaken by hundreds in November. This seems false to us since, in retrospect, the smaller actions resolve into the many facets and eruptions of a singular “mass movement” dispersed in time and place. The smaller actions were what it took to build up to something larger. Again: it is not a question of choosing between these two sides, nor of synthesizing them, but rather of displacing the priority of this opposition. The real dialectic is between negation and experimentation: acts of resistance and refusal which also enable an exploration of new social relations, new uses of space and time.

These two poles can’t be separated out, since the one passes into the other with surprising swiftness. Without confrontation, experimentation risks collapsing back into the existing social relations that form their backdrop—they risk becoming mere lifestyle or culture, recuperated as one more aestheticized museum exhibit of liberal tolerance toward student radicals. But to the extent that any experiment really attempts to take control of space and time and social relations, it will necessarily entail an antagonistic relation to power. This was evident when, during the week before exams reserved for studying (Dec. 7-11), Berkeley students marched back into Wheeler and held an open, unlocked occupation of the unused parts of the building, negotiating an informal agreement with the police and administrators, plastering the walls with slogans, turning classrooms into organizing spaces, study spaces, sleeping spaces, distributing food and literature in the lobby, and holding meetings, dance parties, and movie-screenings in the lecture hall. This attempt to put the building under student-led control turned out to be too much for the administration, and in the morning of Dec. 11, the last day of the occupation, sixty-six people were arrested without warning as they slept. That same evening, in response, a group marched on the Chancellor’s house carrying torches, destroying planters, windows, and lamps. What was originally conceived as a largely non-confrontational action quickly became highly confrontational. There is nothing new without a negation of the old. By the same measure, even if the people occupying Wheeler on Nov. 20th had little time to reinvent their relations, inasmuch as they spent most of their time fighting the cops for control of the doors, what emerged was a structure of solidarity, of spontaneous, self-organized resistance that obliterated any distinction between those inside and those outside, and that passed, by way of political determination, through the police lines meant to enforce this barrier. There is no negation of the old which does not provoke the emergence of something new.
The Characteristics of the Occupation (Barcelona)

by anonymous

The first day I set foot in the plaza, I knew I was experiencing something unique. No one here had ever seen anything like this. Thousands of people, friends and strangers, crowding together, announcing their indignation, defying the law, calling for revolution. I had hardly ever spent time before in Plaça Catalunya. It was just a place for tourists and pigeons. Now I could pass hours here and have conversations with all sorts of people. A Pakistani man asks me to help translate what’s going on. A young student comments on a flyer I’m handing out. Two grandparents argue about democracy and the best way to go about the struggle.

Once people saw that I was handing out flyers, they lined up to take them and soon I was all out. During the first week, everyone was excited, everyone was desperate for new ideas and perspectives. In a matter of days we distributed thousands of flyers, many of them new texts written just for this situation. On the other side of the city and in the metro, I might annoy them, but in any case they would only digest it at the level left its isolation cells and physically manifested itself in the middle of the plaza, and many people were feeling its presence for the very first time. They were recognizing how isolated they had been until now, in the plaza, where they encountered a force, a collective power, waiting to be reborn. In these unprecedented circumstances, people could begin to believe in the possibility of situations that were entirely new.

Before, when you handed someone an anarchist flyer, they might think about it for a while, it might improve their understanding of you, it might annoy them, but in any case they would only digest it at the level of opinions—because you were talking about something hypothetical, something unreal. But in the plaza, hearing our conversations or reading the literature we had on our table, people would really begin to debate: “But if we get rid of all the politicians, new ones will just come replace them.” “No, these kids are right! We need to get rid of all of them. If we’re able to get rid of the first batch, we can get rid of the next ones too.”

People’s aesthetics no longer marked their political niche. The most important thing was their bravery and sincerity. Many times I saw grandparents berating young punks for being too passive, or people dressed for work taking a more radical position than activist hippies. And everyone was talking about real possibilities. For at least the first week, these people meant it when they chanted “Aquí comença la revolució!” “The revolution begins here!”

So where did the so-called Spanish Revolution end up?

I remember yelling to a friend, high on the mass excitement of those first days, “This is our revolution! No barricades, nothing romantic like that, but what do we expect? It’s a piece of shit, but we already knew this is the world we live in. We have a lot of work to do!”

Within the complexity of the Spanish Revolution, one could find plenty to denounce. For a critical anarchist, it would be easier to reject the whole thing than embrace it. Fortunately, on the whole, Barcelona anarchists refused to take the easy road.

Most noteworthy in its long list of faults were its disappointed pretensions of being revolutionary. The Democracia Real Ya (DRY) activists did their best to place the whole movement in an ideological straight-jacket from the beginning. In Barcelona in particular, these activists were joined by a legion of minor league politicians, particularly Catalan indepes, as well as Trotskyists and dogmatic pacifists, all trying to get a piece of the pie. These in turn were aided by a great mass of well-meaning people who were simply reproducing the values of democracy and non-violence taught to them by the system, and no small number of highly skilled and no less well-meaning activists of the anti-globalization or student variety—including some anarchists—who cherished the processes of consensus and direct democracy.

This complex agglomeration of people formed a powerful recuperation machine that could not be neutralized with any simple approach. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

The preamble of the DRY manifesto gives a good impression of their political brand:

We are ordinary people. We are like you: people who get up every morning to study, work or find a job, people who have family and friends. People, who work hard every day to provide a better future for those around us. Some of us consider ourselves progressive, others conservative. Some of us are believers, some not. Some of us have clearly defined ideologies, others are apolitical, but we are all concerned and angry about the political, economic, and social outlook which we see around us: corruption among politicians, businessmen, bankers, leaving us helpless, without a voice.

DRY did an excellent job of formulating a mediocre politics defined by its populism, victimism, reformism, and moralism. By using common,
value-laden terms such as “democracy” (good) and “corruption” (bad), they created a discursive trap that garnered overwhelming support for all their proposals while deflecting or falsely including proposals that went further. Their stated minimums included revolutionary language and the highly popular sentiment that “we’re going to change everything,” while offering a ladder of demands that basically signaled the prices, from cheap to expensive, at which they would sell out. It started with reform of the electoral law, passed through laws for increased oversight of the bankers, and reached, at its most radical extreme, a refusal to pay back the bailout loans. Everything was structured around demands communicated to the existing government, but prettied up in populist language. Thus, the popular, anarchist slogan Ningú ens representa, “No one represents us,” was distorted within their program to mean, “None of the politicians currently in power represent us; we want better ones who will.”

However, to carry out this balancing act, they did have to adopt vaguely antiauthoritarian organizing principles inherited from the antiglobalization movement, such as open assemblies, no spokespersons, and no political parties.

Proposals centered on direct action or sentiments containing a rejection of government and capitalism were easily neutralized within this ideological framework. The former would be paternally tolerated as cute little side projects eclipsed by the major projects of reformists, and the latter would be applauded, linked back to the popular rhetoric already in use, and corrupted to mean an opposition to current politicians or specific bankers.

The central assembly did not give birth to one single initiative. What it did, rather, was to grant legitimacy to initiatives worked out in the com-

missions; but this process must not be portrayed in positive terms: This granting of legitimacy was in fact a robbing of the legitimacy of all the decisions made in the multiple spaces throughout the plaza not incorporated into an official commission. Multiple times, self-appointed representatives of this or that commission tried to suppress spontaneous initiatives that did not bear their stamp of legitimacy. At other times, commissions, moderators, and internal politicians specifically contravened decisions made in the central assembly, when doing so would favor further centralization. This is not a question of corruption or bad form; democracy always subverts its own mechanisms in the interests of power.

Again and again in the plaza, we saw a correlation between democracy and the paranoia of control: the need for all decisions and initiatives to pass through a central point, the need to make the chaotic activity of a multitudinous occupation legible from a single vantage point—the control room, as it were. This is a statist impulse. The need to impose legibility on a social situation—and social situations are always chaotic—is shared by the democracy activist, who wishes to impose a brilliant new organizational structure; the tax collector, who needs all economic activity to be visible so it can be reapportioned; and the policeman, who desires a panopticon in order to control and punish. I also found that numerous anarchists of various ideological stripes were unable to see the crucial theoretical difference between the oppositions representational democracy vs direct democracy/consensus and centralization vs decentralization, because the first and second terms of both pairs have been turned into synonyms through misuse. For this reason, I have decided to rehabilitate the term “chaos” in my personal usage, as it is a frightening term no populist in the current context would use and abuse, and it relates directly to mathematical theories that directly express the kind of shifting, conflictual, constantly regenerating, acephalous organization anarchists are calling for.

After visiting another city where the encampment had basically killed itself through boredom, I realized that these antiauthoritarian consensus activists had also partially saved the day in Barcelona. Because radical anarchists are so extreme in our critique, we often lack social intuition; we have a hard time viewing the world from the perspective of “normalized” citizens. And while the #SpanishRevolution took everyone by surprise, it especially took us by surprise. Only a few of us had arrived by Wednesday, the third day of the occupation, and most did not come until Thursday or Friday. However, the consensus activists tended to be at the heart of it from early on. Many of them were experienced moderators, thanks to their participation in the great mobilizations of the antiglobalization movement, so they were often the ones facilitating the central assembly. And because they functioned as a bridge between the parasitic grassroots politicians and the masses, they also functioned as a shield for anarchist
ideals, because they were actors in their own right who had their own goals, quite distinct from the goals of the DRY activists or the Trotskyists.

In cities where this activist core did not exist, DRY activists or Trotskyists quickly homogenized the encampments and vigorously suppressed radical ideas. These encampments soon shrank like a desiccated corpse, with more parasites than host body. In Barcelona, on the other hand, anarchists enjoyed legitimacy and presence from the get-go, and the grassroots politicians generally had to pay lip service to anarchist organizational ideals, giving radical anarchists more room to work in.

One of the most repugnant features of the occupation, which ultimately caused many anarchists to stop participating, was the imposition of nonviolence. Nonviolence was one of the original principles of the DRY platform, and in Barcelona the first anti-authoritarian participants either did not try to or were not able to reject it. Nonviolence was never debated, but always included in every action proposal, so the choice before the central assembly was always nonviolence or nothing. In the beginning, activists carried out a few peaceful sit-ins. For May 30, DRY announced an action to be carried out throughout the entire Spanish state: that day, everyone should withdraw 155 euros from their bank accounts (155 = 15-5, or 15 May), "a peaceful and subtle act, but sufficiently contentious and attention-grabbing to clearly demonstrate the indignation we feel, and also our strength and commitment to take this through to the end," in their words.

But generally, their action plan was to do nothing, to stay in the plazas, to prevent people from seizing or blocking the surrounding streets, and to talk about another protest on the fifteenth day of the following month. When anarchists in Barcelona distributed flyers on the third day of the occupation, they quickly released a statement, not approved by any assembly, saying that the occupation was strictly pacifist, and that the police were trying to infiltrate and encourage violence; therefore all the good citizens should bring their cameras and take pictures of everybody and everything.

I believe it was the first Wednesday or Thursday when a group of activists dropped a huge banner from a major building alongside the plaza, reading "Politicians, Bosses, Bankers, CCOO UGT [the major trade unions] Fuck Off." The crowds cheered exultantly. Two days later, another group blocked a street and cut open a section of the giant billboard covering another building, to reveal a large spray-painted slogan beneath; if I remember correctly, it said "No one represents us!" On this second occasion, some people cheered, but self-appointed leaders tried to stop the action and denounced it as violent.

When police carried out their hygienic operation on Friday, May 26, pacifists verbally or physically obliged everyone to sit down and to hold signs with the words "nonviolent resistance." The police beat the protesters with glee, opening heads and breaking arms. On a few occasions when people attempted to snatch away police batons, pacifists ran towards them to bring their message of peace. As thousands more people arrived to liberate the plaza, they overwhelmed police lines and surged towards the cops in the middle, shouting and starting to throw things. Pacifists formed a human chain to protect them. Police were eventually pushed back, not without completing their cleaning operation and allowing the sanitation trucks to depart with all the materials they had stolen. Even though the crowds generally pushed past the limits set forward by the pacifists—and they certainly didn't do it sitting down waiting for the legal team, as the pacifists had advised—the ideologues of nonviolence still claimed it as a victory. They also falsely stated that the police attempted to evict the plaza and were defeated. All this should come as no surprise, as pacifists have done the same thing with the Arab revolts—emboldening statists like Obama to do the same.

The following Saturday was the worst day, when the pacifists formed human chains to keep football fans out of the plaza and cheered police as they arrested hooligans. When there were still comrades in critical condition in the hospital, injured from rubber bullets shot by police officers, these same pacifists proposed going to support a rally the police were holding to protest their upcoming wage cuts.

There were other problems as well. Senegalese immigrants selling sunglasses and Pakistani immigrants selling beer and sandwiches moved into the autonomous zone we had created in the plaza. Selling things on the street, if you're not rich enough to have your own store or kiosk, is illegal in Barcelona, and the cops often amuse themselves chasing immigrant street vendors. Enter the Convivencia (coexistence, living-together) Commission. The CC formed with the explicit objective of not allowing antisistema to come and take over the plaza. Antisistema is a media term originally used to refer to anarchists in a depoliticized and delegitimizing way; it has since been extended to squatters and anyone else who falls outside the range of acceptable democratic opinion. In popular usage it is almost a synonym for hoodlum or hooligan. Consequently, the proposal to form the CC won popular approval in the assembly before any debate could be had, and despite the fact that many non-anarchist participants in the plaza had signs criticizing the media use of the term "antisistema."

The CC police set themselves the task of kicking out the Pakistanis lateros (beer vendors). Their justification was that "they bothered people" by offering beers for sale every few minutes, and that they "created a bad image" for the encampment (in the media). Multiple times, anarchists confronted CC members, who often went around with name-tags and walkie-talkies, but to no avail. Despite accusations of hypocrisy and racism, they specifically refused to talk to the people who had the money to
"buy the beer," and only focused on pushing out the people whose livelihood was based on selling it.

There was a heavy dose of legalism as well among the leading organizers. They attempted to get us to take down our signs against voting, claiming it could be used as a justification for a police eviction, even though the whole occupation was blatantly illegal. At another point they raised a stink when some people started an urban garden in the plaza; they complained that replacing the mulch beds around the fountain with plants was "uncivil." For context, the civilisme laws in Barcelona have been an aggressive tool to kill street culture and make things more comfortable for tourists. Anarchists in the plaza often had to argue against legalist mentalities; it helped that the occupation in itself sprang from illegality. On this front, we gained some ground; the garden, for example, was not suppressed.

There were also problems with certain junkies and drunkards who had taken up residence in the plaza and constantly harassed or even assaulted women. Pacifist organizers and the Convivencia Commission tried to prevent the feminist assembly in the plaza from organizing self-defense classes and taking care of the problem on their own, instead paternalistically offering to protect them. Anarchists had a hard time dealing with the junkies and drunkards who were being jerks. On the one hand, we were glad they were taking advantage of the autonomous zone to live without police harassment for a few weeks. On the other hand, some of them acted in ways we wouldn't tolerate from anybody; in another context, only residual liberal guilt would have kept us from knocking them on their asses. Unfortunately, the situation was extremely complicated: any use of violence could have provoked a major confrontation with the pacifists, with totally unforeseen consequences. Worse still, it could have had a conservative backlash that would have vindicated and dignified more of the CC's policing activities.

On the whole, however, there was much in the plaza to value. It was an extensive, chaotic space of self-organization where people met their logistical needs—sometimes going through the official channels, sometimes not. There was a library, a garden, an international translation center, a kitchen with big stoves and solar cookers, and at any time there were a couple concerts, workshops, debates, and massage parlors taking place, along with innumerable smaller conversations and encounters.

And it was amazing to encounter a wider anarchist community there, to find that most comrades had the same idea to come down to the plaza even though the most visible discourses emanating therefrom were staunchly social-democratic. The comrades we met there were not always members of our pre-existing affinity groups, but also libertarians we had never worked with before. On the whole, comrades demonstrated an impressive commitment, agility of action, and a nuanced and incisive cri-

A Note on Technology

A reader might notice that from the vantage point of the internet, it seems like the "Spanish Revolution" was based almost entirely around Twitter and Facebook, virtual communication that doesn't feature at all in my account. In reality, except for the occasional tech geek wandering by suggesting that we could solve all the world's problems with virtual simultaneous internet democracy, that part of the revolution simply didn't exist for me. Perhaps this is not surprising, in that I don't have a cellphone and don't use Facebook. In the end, these are just tools for spreading the word, and while they do change the terrain, from a certain point of view they are superfluous. I found it easy to be in the center of important happenings and to stay informed. Toting a cellphone around would have just wasted my time and left logs of all my movements and communications for the police to browse at their leisure. For the past
millenia, there have been occasions in which people gather together spontaneously in surprising numbers. As social isolation increases, networking technology helps overcome the growing distances, but it also plays a role in creating them in the first place.

I recall a talk in a Barcelona anarchist social center, in which we called an Egyptian anarchist in Tahrir Square via Skype. She laughed about the whole Twitter and Facebook obsession, explaining that those tools were useful but that their importance had been exaggerated by Western media.

Anarchist Strategies

After debating the matter with comrades nearly every day for weeks, I think those of us who chose to participate in the occupation with an anarchist critique made the right strategic choices. Our only errors come down to a question of finding the right balance between the various forms of activity.

The few anarchists who were there at the beginning were instrumental in blocking the signing of the DRY manifesto and in approving the decision not to produce any unitary manifestos. This allowed the Barcelona occupation to take on an independent character and develop according to its own needs, which endowed it with more vivacity. In Sevilla, by contrast, the occupation in Las Setas signed on to the Madrid platform from the beginning, never developed as much diversity or strength, and quickly lost what it had. And in Madrid, the assembly passed a law early on to allow no ideological symbols or ideological groups in the occupation, which was a decisive factor in preventing the anarchists there from ever setting up their own table to distribute propaganda. Accordingly, they had far less visibility, though they made a major effort to participate in the various commissions. We owe what we achieved in Barcelona in part to the fact that some anarchists went to the protest and occupation at the very beginning, despite the odious democratic rhetoric that predominated; and that they did not go as warm bodies only, but as fighters or activists with their own specific critique.

After more anarchists arrived on Wednesday and Thursday, there was a debate that ended in an impasse: do we participate in the assembly and the commissions, or do we stay at the margins? A couple of us argued that the place of the anarchists is always in the margins, and our role is to subvert the center and make sure the margins are more alive, more creative, and more interesting than the center. Fortunately, we did not win that debate, although subsequent events vindicated our position. In the end, most “radical” anarchists participated in various commissions, especially Content, where minimum demands and political programs were formulated. Anarchist participation basically made this commission explode, as the Trotskyists and social-democrats who previously dominated it found it impossible, with us involved, to get approval for their populist programs. Subsequently, the commission broke up into about a dozen sub-commissions: these included labor, ecological, and other themed ones, and also “Self-Organization and Direct Democracy.” This did not prevent the Trots from subsequently speaking in the name of Content and trying to delegitimize the decisions of the sub-commissions.

Those favoring self-organization (anarchists and autonomists) and those favoring direct democracy (radical liberals) were lumped in the same sub-commission; the latter found this appropriate, while the former considered the two terms to be diametrically opposed. Of course, the former were right, but it was a good thing the two groups were lumped together because this allowed the two camps to debate, spreading a critique of direct democracy beyond anarchist circles and giving anarchists good practice in communicating. Not to sound arrogant, but the partisans of self-organization tended to win the debates, as the democrats had superficial ideas and generally less experience in any kind of struggle.

By participating in the commissions, anarchists achieved multiple victories. In a few instances, we changed the form of the occupation; in many instances, we held effective debates, crystallized our analysis, and gained contact with a broader antiauthoritarian community. We also blocked several attempts to pacify or neutralize the most beautiful aspects of the occupation.

However, within a couple weeks most of us realized that we had made a mistake by putting so much energy into the commissions. We had effectively sequestered anarchist ideas in a few useful but relatively small spaces; we had exhausted ourselves with daily meetings; and we had allowed ourselves to be seduced by the official organizational structures, which generally proved themselves impervious to decentralization from the inside. Meanwhile, we had only realized a tiny fraction of the occupation's potential for self-organization. This is ironic, in that most of us were busy talking about self-organization in the appropriate commissions.

On a few occasions, we defied the central assembly and the commissions by organizing things on our own, starting projects in small affinity groups and working out conflicts with other projects on a case-by-case basis. We set up the literature tent, organized two or three talks, two or three debates, helped organize a concert, and helped organize an “escort” protest at a nearby workplace that had just fired a worker for being pregnant. If we had only put half as much energy into the commissions, those valuable debates still would have happened, but we could have organized ten times as many informal events in the plaza, making it a reality that the margins were stronger than the center.

As it happened, within a week the anarchist tent had become a place where people rested between meetings—this meant that we weren't hav-
We also built some common ground with another tent they were trying to kick out, and then the Trotskyists and Stalinists and all these other parties could also set up their tents, and we didn't want to be responsible for that, did we?

At the time, there were only about six of us there. I don't want to make myself too much of a protagonist; everyone telling the story from their own perspective will remember analogous episodes, because we have all made heroic efforts in these days. But the fact of the matter is, I soon found there were only two of us who opposed moving the tent, and the other one was willing to accept the majority position. I argued forcibly: who cares if all the little Marxist-Leninist parties in the world move in? The commissions and the official structures are far more dangerous. Furthermore, we were fully legitimate in setting up this tent, because we were not a pre-existing political party but a spontaneous initiative that arose from the plaza itself. Most of the people in the tent at that point had never worked together on any project before, and a couple of us had met for the first time in the plaza. Not only was it our responsibility as anarchists to defy the commissions and open up the plaza for all sorts of initiatives, but it was a good thing if they subsequently tried to kick us out in the general assembly. As anarchists, we want to make existing conflicts visible, not avoid them. Let them try to kick us out, and then see where this democratic revolution goes.

We argued face to face with various commissiocrats, sometimes being nice, sometimes being outraged, until they were convinced or exhausted. We also built some common ground with another tent they were trying to kick out, one that had been set up by some performance kids from a circus squat. If we had not won that little battle and realized the need to seek conflict not only with the State but also in the social movements, which also contain the State, we would have been at a severe disadvantage in everything that followed.

Other strategic decisions were easier. We all agreed it was important to confront the keepers of order, such as the people from the Convivencia Commission. We started arguments where necessary, but remained willing to reconcile and be friendly if they stopped acting like cops or politicians; this actually happened on a couple occasions.

Our propaganda efforts also didn't need any discussion, and they were modestly Herculean. It's impossible to say how many flyers we handed out, but it may well have exceeded 30,000, plus hundreds of pamphlets and posters. Surprisingly, it was all self-financed via a donation jar at our table. Especially in the first week, passersby tossed in huge quantities of coins and even bills so we could keep printing our supposedly extremist and alienating propaganda.

The final strategic conflict I'll detail involved criticizing allies who were involved in the centralization of the meetings. Our criticisms were harsh at times, and they strained more than a few friendships, but I think it was absolutely necessary. By widely posting the accusation that the assembly was being manipulated by Trotskyists and left Catalan politicians, we put these people on the defensive and limited their activity. The same approach was harder with the DRY activists, unfortunately, because they were previously unknown and they were in the middle of the whole thing from the beginning.

Meanwhile, by strongly criticizing the consensus activists for facilitating this manipulation and recreating the State, we made visible an absolutely vital line of conflict, deflating the various excuses that hid authoritarianism within questions of process and inefficiency. This latter group, the consensus activists, mostly had good intentions, and some were in fact comrades, so they were genuinely sensitive to criticism. The results of our attempts to criticize them will surface in the coming months as they evaluate their own intervention in this phenomenon and we continue criticizing them. It is necessary that as soon as possible, everyone who honestly desires freedom recognize that democracy must be destroyed in all its forms.

What We Learned

We can derive a number of lessons from this experience, many of which are still being digested.

For me, the first is this: there can be no more excuses for mass assemblies moderated by consensus specialists. It is important for collectivities to come together; when this happens, it is important. But the only mass organizational form that can exist without being imposed is that of an encuentro, an encounter, where people speak their minds or share ideas or ask for help on initiatives that they are starting without needing anyone's permission. Within this encounter, there can be individuals and affinity groups, people involved in formal (nonparty) organizations or informal federations, or whatever. The whole question of formality or informality is a distraction—it doesn't matter, it only comes down to personal taste. From an anarchist viewpoint, the only necessity is that there be no
decision-making body that has more legitimacy than all the others. A social movement is essentially an attempt by society to be reborn out of the void of capitalist alienation. We should not have to adhere to any single organizational form in order to fully participate in the social movement, because every single one will exclude certain kinds of people.

In the past, the CNT played this role. To participate in the struggle in Barcelona, you practically had to work within the CNT, and they screwed it up something awful. It would be a similar mistake to grant legitimacy to a mass assembly, regardless of whether it uses consensus or voting, because depending on the time and location of the meetings, how long they last, whether there are chairs to sit in or whether the space can be accessed by handicapped people, some people will be excluded. Even if you could design the perfect meeting form and rewind capitalist development to recreate a proletariat that all went to work and went to bed at the same time, there would still be exclusion, because some people just don’t do meetings, while others have large crowds and speechmaking in their blood. The only answer to this is to recognize a web of decision-making structures and organizing forms with equal legitimacy, destroying once and for all the divide between public and private.

Secondly, we learned again what makes a good intervention: presence plus critique. Presence means being there, but it also means participating, becoming a material and integral part of what is going on. Critique means not leaving your brain at home because you think you’re going to scare people off with your anarchist ideas; it means expressing yourself, and also listening, and evaluating your own behavior.

I had a chance to compare our experiences with a failed anarchist intervention in another city that confirms this point. Some comrades went to the encampment there just as warm bodies, without criticism. Others went provocatively, snubbing everything and everyone and leaving when they got a bad reaction, deciding not to come back because it wasn’t a comfortable space for them. It strikes me that these two opposite approaches are complementary. Both are based on avoiding personal discomfort.

Some Further Lessons:

People are situational, not sovereign. This same idea seemed to be confirmed by the Greek experience. With the possible exception of a few Nietzschean superbeings, people are not sovereign individuals who live according to their opinions. Rather, people respond to their situations. Accordingly, the same person who has little time for an anarchist text on a normal day of the week will stop and read it and fantasize with you about overthrowing the State if you happen to meet them in the unexpected terrain of a spontaneous collectivity. The next question to explore is to what extent we can plant seeds, in the boring moments, that will stay with people and have the chance to sprout when those people enter the unpredictable terrain of a rupture.

Collaboration between the various sects of libertarians was vital. Perhaps affinity groups are overrated: in the end it did not matter so much whether a fellow anarchist agreed with you on the question of the existence or nonexistence of the proletariat; it mattered more whether we could get along and communicate. It was a great advantage to have many different perspectives mixing, different strategies being developed, and different people being drawn to participate in different ways. The anarcho-syndicalists made a great effort to be present in many of the commissions, and it was funny and instructive seeing them participating in the same popular debates with nihilist and insurrectionary anarchists. They also brought with them the important tradition of the CNT, which granted legitimacy to anarchist participation on the whole.

Decentralization is not the same as dispersal. A mass gathering point such as Plaça Catalunya can give us a sense of collective strength, which dispersal would dissipate. Decentralization means not utilizing a unitary organizational structure with central nodes. It is a question of mode, not scale. Many people, including some anarchists, misunderstood the anarchist proposal for decentralization as a proposal to shift activity to the neighborhoods. While this was in fact part of what most anarchists were proposing, it is equally possible to transplant centralized structures at a smaller scale to all the neighborhood assemblies. Fortunately, the Barcelona neighborhood assemblies, which formed around the September general strike, had already defeated an attempt to centralize them within the umbrella organizing structure that arose around the strike. They preferred their autonomy. As such, they were a favorable terrain for anarchists, especially where we had already been participating in our neighborhood assembly. It was harder for grassroots politicians to take them over, and harder to impose an ideological unity, because we already had a point of unity: we lived in the neighborhood together, and we had no pretensions of all thinking the same way.

When we express anarchist ideas honestly, humbly, and passionately, it can reveal that many of those who remain silent are already partially on our side. Inertia and common values work against us and favor the populists and democrats, but anarchist ideas almost always win a debate because they speak to an inalienable impulse towards freedom that exists in everyone who still has a heart. The important thing, then, is to participate in the debate, as long as that debate does not legitimize official political channels but takes place between ordinary people. It is no coincidence that the dogmatic pacifists boycotted the debate we organized about nonviolence. They’re not interested in a debate, but in imposing their practice.

Nonviolence is not a cultural peculiarity, but a real danger everywhere de-
mocracy exists. I thought that with its Mediterranean culture and its long, living history of forceful struggles, Spain would never have a problem with nonviolence. But in a period of a few years, it has appeared with a strength that could rival the pacifism in the UK or US. And these pacifists do not generally emerge from a trajectory of the historical nonviolent struggles in Spain, such as the antimilitarist movement. Rather, they have been created out of whole cloth by the democratic context itself; the ground was prepared, in my mind, by the tolerance of leftist, democratic, rights-based discourses in the antagonistic social movements of the last couple decades. People who identify as peaceful should be heartily encouraged to make themselves at home within our struggles. Nonviolence, on the other hand, must be treated with contempt until it is made synonymous with cowardice and snitching, and decent pacifists abandon ship to never again be confused with cop-lovers. By continuing to use the dichotomy of nonviolence and violence, and arguing whether or not our actions qualify as violent, we are only empowering them. Violence does not exist: it is a vague and moralistic category. Only nonviolence exists, and it means selling out, running away, and censoring other people's struggles.

Direct democracy is just representative democracy on a smaller scale. It inevitably recreates the specialists, centralization, and exclusion we associate with existing democracies. Within four days, once the crowds exceeded 5,000, the experiment in direct democracy was already rife with false and manipulated consensus, silenced minorities, increasing abstention from voting, and domination by specialists and internal politicians.

In a story worthy of Kafka, we were trying to schedule a debate and we wanted to let those at the Activity Commission know. The kid at the table looked down at his form, a crappy little piece of paper written up in ballpoint pen, and told us we couldn't have our event in the spot where we wanted to let those at the Activity Commission know. The response was far more pathetic than I had expected. "Because our forms are divided into different columns, see, one column for each space in the plaza, but that space over by the staircase, well that's not an official space." "That's okay, we don't mind, just write it down." "But, but, I can't. There isn't a column for it." "Well, make a column." "Um, I can't." "Oh Christ, look, which one's open—look, here, 'Pink Space,' just write our event down for the 'Pink Space' and when the time comes we'll just move it." Within two weeks, without any prior training, the Spanish Revolution had created perfect bureaucrats!

Some radical anarchists put too much trust in the commissions. They were only useful as spaces for debate and as spaces to subvert. For example, in the beginning, the assembly decided not to release unitary manifests for everyone. Subsequently, in the commissions, anarchists had to fight proposals for minimum demands and manifests every single night. Finally, there was a commission meeting with no anarchists present, and the minimums were passed through the commission and subsequently ratified by the general assembly, which ratified nearly every proposal passed before it. On the other hand, the anarchist proposal to decentralize the assembly was voted on twice, and each time achieved overwhelming support, but curiously was defeated on technicalities both times. This action demonstrated that we were right, we had lots of support, and the assembly was a sham—that, in itself, was a victory. But direct democracy cannot be reformed from within. It has to be destroyed.

In another example of the unsuitability of these organizational forms, the attempt to organize a simple debate about nonviolence almost failed because the Self-Organization and Direct Democracy Sub-Commission needed days to debate and consense on exactly how they wanted to do it. In the end, two people decided to ignore the commission, and joining with another anarchist who was not participating in Self-Organization, the three of them organized a successful talk and debate in just a day, accomplishing what a group of fifty people had failed at over the course of a week.

Finally, we learned our own limits. After two weeks of meetings, debates, and grassroots bureaucracy, some of us were ready to shoot ourselves. We were exhausted, and we had made the grave error of dropping all our other projects and actions. This demonstrated a necessary flexibility, but it also meant that during these most critical moments, radical anarchist actions weren't happening in the streets. It always felt vital to be in the meetings, in case something should go wrong, but we could have moderated our participation and devoted some energy elsewhere.

In this respect, it became obvious that we lack people who are comfortable with public speaking. This is a vital skill we need to develop collectively. Often, people with anti-authoritarian critiques made up a large proportion of a meeting, but we just sat through it all and listened to bullshit because none of us wanted to take the microphone. In the second open assembly in the Clot neighborhood, I started to get depressed because it was exhibiting none of the anti-authoritarian sentiment of the first one. Populist inertia was steamrolling us. Finally, I took the mic and launched into a ten-minute speech urging a focus on long-term revolutionary goals and self-organization, and slamming reformism, pacifism, and attempts at a homogenous unity. A huge part of the crowd cheered, and afterwards more people were motivated to get up and express similar sentiments, shifting the direction of the whole meeting. At the end, half a dozen people, from grandmothers to students, thanked me for my contribution, while others came over to start arguments that ended with them either convinced of or at least respecting the anarchist position. I didn't enjoy speaking or receiving compliments—it made me feel nervous and self-conscious—but I wonder: if I hadn't, would the meeting have run
its course with the uninterrupted illusion of a reformist majority?

Now that the Plaça Catalunya occupation is disappearing, the struggle will continue in the neighborhoods, in the radical unions, in preexisting affinity groups, and in the new relationships that have been formed during these days. Time will tell, but I suspect we have made a great leap forward by participating in the neighborhood assemblies, meeting new accomplices, and winning ourselves a great social visibility in spite of a hostile democratic environment. The real revolution is a long time in coming, but its sputtering attempts to come to life are plainly visible in these surprising, pathetic, exhausting, beautiful moments, as long as we have the fortitude to be there.

Resolution by the Popular Assembly of
Syntagma Square – May 28 2011

From an assembly attended by 3,000 people
For a long time now, decisions are taken for us, without us.
We are workers, unemployed, pensioners, youth who came to
Syntagma to struggle for our lives and our futures.
We are here because we know that the solution to our prob-
lems can only come from us.
We invite all Athenians, the workers, the unemployed, and the
youth to Syntagma, and the entire society to fill up the squares
and to take life into its hands.
There, in the squares, we shall co-shape all our demands.
We call all workers who will be striking in the coming period
to end up and to remain at Syntagma.
We will not leave the squares before those who lead us here
leave first: Governments, the Troika, Banks, Memorandums
and everyone who exploits us.
We tell them that the debt is not ours.
DIRECT DEMOCRACY NOW!
EQUALITY – JUSTICE – DIGNITY!
The only defeated struggle is the one that was never fought!

Anarchism is a series of developing theories about how best to inhabit anarchy. This section demonstrates some of the specific approaches that have informed the Occupation Movement.

Wolfi Landstreicher is a well-known writer whose lengthy pamphlet Autonomous Organization and Anarchist Intervention argues for an approach to engagement that couples self-organization with direct action. He gives particular insight into what this means in the context of the United States. David Graeber (unfairly credited with a central, rather than supporting, role in the events of Occupy Wall Street) offers a concise statement on how anarchist principles have informed the Occupation Movement. Cindy Milstein, an anarchist activist based in Philadelphia, argues for a directly democratic approach in the tradition of Murray Bookchin’s Libertarian Municipalism. Finally, Phoenix Insurgent offers a more explicit class analysis of anarchist participation.
Autonomous Self-Organization and Anarchist Intervention: A Tension in Practice

by Wolli Landstreicher

Introduction: a few definitions and explanations

Any potentially liberatory struggle among the exploited and dispossessed must be based on autonomous self-organization. As anarchists, who are also usually among the exploited, we have every reason to participate in and encourage these struggles. But since we have specific ideas of how we want to go about our struggles and a specifically revolutionary aim, our participation takes the form of an intervention seeking to move the struggles in a specific direction. Having no desire to be any sort of vanguard or leadership or to be caught up in the joyless game of politicking, we find ourselves in a tension of trying to live our conception of struggle and freedom within the context of an unfree reality, of trying to confront the real daily problems we face with our own refusal to play by the rules of this world. Thus, the question of autonomous self-organization and anarchist intervention is an ongoing problem with which to grapple, refusing to fall into easy answers and faith in organizational panaceas. To begin exploring this question let's start with a few definitions and explanations.

Autonomous self-organization

When I speak of autonomous self-organization, I am speaking of a specific phenomenon that tends to arise whenever people, angered by their conditions and having lost faith in those delegated to act for them, decide to act for themselves. Autonomous self-organization therefore never manifests in the form of a political party, a union, or any other sort of representative organization. All of these forms of organization claim to represent the people in struggle, to act in their name. And what defines autonomous self-organization is precisely the rejection of all representation. Parties, unions, and other representative organizations tend to interact with autonomous organization only in the form of recuperators of the struggle, striving to take over leadership and impose themselves as spokespeople of the struggle—usually with the aim of negotiating with the rulers. Thus, they can only be viewed as potential usurpers wherever real self-organized revolt is occurring.

from theanarchistlibrary.org
Autonomous self-organization has certain essential traits that define it. First of all it is non-hierarchical. There is no institutional or permanent leadership or authority. While someone who proves particularly knowledgeable with regards to specific matters relating to the struggle at hand will be given the attention she deserves for such knowledge, this cannot be allowed to become the basis for any permanent leadership role, because that would undermine another essential trait of autonomous self-organization: horizontal communication and relationships. This is a matter of people talking with each other, interacting with each other, expressing needs and desires openly, actually discussing the problems they face together and in practical terms, without any leadership to conform this expression to a set line. This brings us to another trait, one that may be controversial to collectivist ideologues, but that is the only way of guaranteeing the first two traits: the basic unit of autonomous self-organization is the individual. Otherwise, it could be argued that all states and businesses are autonomous self-organization, because on the institutional and collective level they do organize themselves, but the individuals who comprise their human component are defined by these institutions and placed in accordance with the institutional needs. So autonomous self-organization is first of all the individual organizing his struggle against the conditions this world forces upon her on her own terms, finding the means necessary for carrying out that struggle. But among the means necessary are relations with other people, so autonomous self-organization is also a collective practice. But that collective practice is not based upon conforming individuals to an organization imposed on them, but rather on the development of relationships of mutuality between them in which they discover the areas of commonality in their struggles and need, affinity in their dreams and desires. One could say that autonomous self-organization is the development of a shared struggle based on mutuality for the full realization of each individual involved. To further clarify this point (and to quickly counter a false dichotomy often made in which they discover the areas of commonality in their struggles and need, affinity in their dreams and desires which have no relation to what capital has brought together, this process of abolishing themselves as a class has already begun since they are beginning precisely to talk and act with each other as individuals. Finally, autonomous self-organization is practical. It is not the setting up of any formal organization to represent anything. It is rather the bringing together of the elements necessary for accomplishing the various tasks and activities necessary to the particular struggle. This will tend to include the development of ways to communicate, ways to coordinate actions, ways to gather necessary tools and so on. As will be seen below, in large-scale struggles, assemblies tend to develop for discussing what is necessary; these are not formalized structures, but rather specific methods for dealing with the problems at hand.

Anarchist intervention

We anarchists are ourselves often among the exploited and dispossessed. Thus, we have an immediate need to struggle against this social order. At the same time, we come to these daily struggles with a conscious revolutionary perspective and with specific ideas about how to go about these struggles. Thus, it is inevitable that our participation as anarchists will take the form of intervention. So it is worthwhile to consider what makes our participation an intervention.

First of all, as anarchists, we come to every struggle with a conscious revolutionary perspective. Whatever the specific cause that provokes a struggle, we recognize it as an aspect of the social order that must be destroyed in order to open the possibilities for a free and self-determined existence. Struggles and revolts are generally provoked by specific circumstances, not by mass recognition of the need to destroy the state, capital and all the institutions through which domination and exploitation are carried out. Anarchist intervention, therefore, attempts to expand the struggle beyond the circumscribed cause that provokes it, to point out, not just in words, but through action the connection of the specific problem at hand to the larger reality of the social order that surrounds us. This would include finding and exposing the commonalities between various struggles as well as the differences that can enhance a broader struggle of revolt.

Because we anarchists come to any struggle with a specific revolutionary perspective, it is in our interest to propose a methodology of struggle which carries this perspective in it, a principled methodology which provides a basis for our complicity in any struggle. The methodology of which I speak is not just a methodology for struggle, but something to apply to all of life as far as possible. First of all, the struggle must be carried out with complete autonomy from all representative organizations. We need to recognize unions and parties as usurpers and determine our specific activities in any struggle for ourselves, without regard for their demands.
Secondly, our practice needs to be that of true direct action—figuring out how to accomplish the specific tasks we pose ourselves on our own, not demanding any authority or any "representative" of the struggle to act for us. Thirdly, we need to remain in permanent conflict with the social order we oppose with regard to the specific matter at hand, keeping our attacks up in order to make it clear that we have no intention of being recuperated. Fourthly, we need to be on the attack, refusing to negotiate or compromise with those in power. This methodology carries within it both the principle of self-organization and the revolutionary necessity to destroy the present ruling order.

Because of the nature of our anarchist aspirations, our intervention in struggles will always express itself as a tension on several levels. First of all, as I said most of us are ourselves among the exploited and disposessed of the current social order, not part of the ruling or managing classes. Thus, we face the same immediate realities as those around us, with the same desire for immediate relief. But we also have a desire for a new world and want to bring this desire into all of our struggles not just in words, but in the way we go about our practice. Thus, there is the tension of willfully moving toward autonomy and freedom under oppressive conditions. In addition, we have specific ways in which we desire to go about our struggles and live our lives. These methods are based upon horizontal relationships and the refusal of hierarchy and vanguardism. So there is the tension of striving to find ways of putting forth our conceptions of a different way of encountering life and the world than that of working to maintain a certain level of survival. We will look at a variety of other examples below. The second sort of intervention would be something such as the building of a nuclear missile base in the area where one lives or police murder of poor and minority people. These call for an immediate response, and anarchists facing such situations will want to carry out and encourage autonomous responses using direct action rather than making demands of those in power. The precise way in which anarchists might intervene in such situations would vary depending on circumstances. But the point is always to encourage the tendency toward autonomy, self-organization, and direct action rather than to push a political perspective.

A few significant features

There are a few significant features that stand out in these situations:

1. Riots, uprisings, and insurrections are not generally inspired by grand ideas, utopian dreams, or total theoretical critiques of the social order. Often the spark that sets them off is quite banal: economic instability, bad working conditions, betrayal by those who claim to represent one’s rights, police brutality. These seemingly minor details spark revolt when rage combines with a distrust in both the ruling and oppositional institutions. This fact calls for anarchists to avoid an ideological purity that calls for participation only in total struggles. It also calls for a keen theoretical development capable of immediately understanding specific situations in terms of the totality of domination, exploitation, and alienation, and at the same time capable of making a practical application of this theory. This requires a willingness to constantly examine the developing realities around us, making connections that show the necessity for a revolutionary rupture, while at the same time singling out appropriate areas for intervention and appropriate targets for attack.

2. When an uprising or spontaneous struggle moves beyond the initial stages, the exploited recognize the need for horizontal communication. Assemblies or something similar are spontaneously developed. The rejection of politics and representation express themselves in these methods. At the same time, there are always party and union hacks, along with other predators, looking for the weak spot where they can “offer their assistance.” Here again, anarchists and anti-political revolutionaries need to have their shit together to keep an ongoing attack against these recu-
The Situation in the US: the absence of a social movement

None of the examples that I have used come from the United States. This is not because there have been no examples of self-organized struggles and revolt in this country, but most of them are more distant in time and didn't go nearly as far as the events above. There was the wildcat movement among coal-miners in the '60s. Although there were plenty of political hacks around, the anti-war, black liberation, and other movements of the '60s also had significant self-organized aspects. The mutinies among American military personnel in Vietnam were self-organized revolts. And in more recent times, apparently in one or two of the cities to which rioting spread after the Rodney King verdict in 1992, spontaneous assemblies actually took place to decide how to go about the rioting and looting effectively.

But in significant ways the situation in the United States now is not the same as it was in the 1960s (and even then different movements and struggles seemed to have trouble connecting), nor is it like Italy or Spain (where, even now, wildcat strikers get support from others, including revolutionaries), Algeria, or Bolivia.

Perhaps, the first thing we have to face as revolutionary anarchists in the US is that presently there is no social movement in this country. Collective social revolt only occurs in sudden explosions in response to immediate situations and quickly dissipates as repression and recuperation move in to defuse the situation.

The illusion that there is a movement in this country (to the extent the illusion exists) is the result of specialized activism, the myriad of groups, organizations, and networks that publicize this, that or the other cause, issue, or ideology. But specialized activism is in fact the very opposite of a social movement for a variety of reasons. First of all, it is essentially political rather than social in nature. The various activist groups represent the cause, issue, or ideology that is their specialty. This representation can only occur through the reification of whatever reality stands behind the cause of the group, its transformation into a spectacular image (the clear-cut forest, the dead Iraqi baby, the cat with the electrode in its head, ...). And this process of spectacularization guarantees that these matters will continue to be perceived in a fragmented manner which maintains the specialized role of the activist groups and prevents any revolutionary analysis or practice in relation to the particular matter they specialize in. The protests of these activist groups can give the image of resistance, but they do not spring from the daily lives and lived experiences of those involved, and so do not constitute real social resistance.

The specialization of activism around spectacular causes also transforms those involved, at least potentially, into representatives of struggle. In the US, this is not a minor matter. The number of times that activist groups and religious leaders have quelled a riotous situation by playing the role of "representatives" of the oppressed before the authorities is truly telling. With cries of "justice" and "rights", they move an immediate response of rage against this society away from the area of social rebellion and into the area of politics and petition to the authorities. Those who play this role have to be recognized as the enemies of any social movement of rebellion, the guarantee that every immediate rebellion will remain a mere fragment, an event without past or future and without any relationship to rebellions elsewhere — the endless now of the media in which meaningful activity becomes impossible. We can't let some ridiculous politically correct morality prevent us from exposing their role fiercely.

Specialized activism is itself a symptom of deeper problems. In all of the situations described above, there were levels of social cohesion that do not currently exist in the United States. Without trying to trace all the reasons here, it is necessary to recognize that ours is one of the most atomized societies in existence. Although there have been some significant workers' struggles in this country since World War 2, these have tended to be isolated, because class consciousness has nearly disappeared in
stay within the confines of the specialized activist milieu. Of course this will guarantee no such transformation occurs.

It would be easy to despair in the face of American social reality. It is difficult to see how any social movement can be revived out of such extensive atomization. And yet, there has been some evidence that among those at the bottom some awareness of a need to actually communicate is developing. The recent economic decline has pushed more people into precarious positions, opening some, at least, to examining deeper questions. Nonetheless, the creation of any real social movement here will have to involve a real and concrete practical rejection of activist politics, and exposure and fierce confrontation with the recuperators it fosters. Since we desire a radical social transformation, one of our tasks as anarchists is precisely to encourage those who are becoming outraged at the conditions of their existence in this society to think and act for themselves rather than relying on the various ideologies and organization that will offer to represent their rage and resistance.

Two examples of the problem

When the Bush administration started to talk of the “necessity” of the current war in Iraq, there was some protest immediately. As the claims of the administration about the reasons for the war became increasingly suspect, the questioning of the war moved far beyond any activist milieu. From January 2003 through the beginning of the war, one saw huge demonstrations in which the vast majority of those involved were not activists. But most of the marches and demonstrations were organized by specialists in activism, petty politicians of the left with their own agendas. In L.A., the activist coalition that organized the demos was dominated by ANSWER (a front group for one of the multitude of ABC-socialist parties) and Not In Our Name (a front group for the Revolutionary Communist Party). The demonstrations were well regulated marches ending in rallies with the typical boring rhetorical speakers — the preachers to the crowd that activists love. Perhaps the most absurd thing was the competition between ANSWER and Not In Our Name for the attention of the crowd. ANSWER would call for a more reserved approach to the protest, while Not In Our Name would call for a more militant approach, but both were obviously seeking to establish their leadership over the movement. I would not be surprised if there were similar dynamics in many other cities. So it comes as no surprise that the anti-war movement has dwindled back down to a mainly activist movement, and not a particular energetic one. Undoubtedly, with the increasing exposure of the extent of the dishonesty of the administration, there is still a great deal of questioning, but no outlet. Since the morale of American soldiers in Iraq is extremely low...
and the desertion rate high, it is clear that there is potential for resistance among soldiers, but without a social movement of resistance to the war effort, soldiers may feel that they would have no support if they rebelled.

Another example of what can happen when the representatives of struggle take control happened in the neighborhood where I live. In May 2003, three blocks from the house where I was living, a cop murdered a woman who had been in a car they pulled over. There was an immediate response of outrage throughout the neighborhood, with a spontaneous memorial at the place she was killed, and demonstrations and rallies. The woman was an African-American, and in this area religious leaders play a central political role in the African-American “community.” So religious leaders immediately imposed themselves as representatives of the outrage, and immediately directed any potential struggle into the “proper channels,” calling for nonviolence. A few anarchists wrote and distributed flyers about the nature of the police, but got little response. The trajectory of this particular “struggle” had already been set by the religious leaders who had set themselves up as its representatives, and that direction was toward appeal to the ruling powers to reform their practices, an appeal that proved worthless, since the murdering officer is back on the streets with the authorities and the media protecting his identity.

Conclusion

Autonomous self-organization would have to be the basis both of a truly free existence and of the struggle to achieve that existence. It is the very opposite of politics and in practice either rejects it or is destroyed by it. The practice of self-organization seems to develop spontaneously when people rise up in revolt. What distinguishes it from politics is its opposition to representation and compromise—not just with the ruling order, but within the self-organized movement itself. Thus, rather than seeking to impose collective decisions involving compromise, it seeks to find a method for interweaving the desires, interests and needs of all involved in a way that is actually pleasing to each. This is not just a minor aspect, but is essential. Once the aim of organizing our struggles and our lives together ceases to be that of finding the ways for interweaving our differing desires, interests and needs so that all find fulfillment and instead becomes that of finding compromises, positions, programs and platforms start to take the place of desires, dreams and aspirations. Then, the representatives of the various positions, programs and platforms can find their place in the situation and transform self-organization into politics. It has happened before in revolutionary situations with horrible results.

This gives an indication of the way anarchist intervention is best carried out. We do not need to create any sort of political organization to represent anarchy. To do so would, in fact, be to work against self-organization. Instead we should start from ourselves, our own condition as individuals who have had our lives stolen from us, our struggle against that condition and our desire to be the creators of our own existence. From this basis, anarchist intervention would not be evangelism for a political program or for true revolutionary consciousness. It would rather be the search for accomplices, the development of relationships of affinity, the intertwining of our desires and passions, of our destructive rage, our ideas and our dreams with those of others in their struggles and revolts. Such a search can find its way in the midst of social movements of revolt, discovering the spreading affinities that offer an informal federation of complicity. It can also find its way where no social movement seems to exist, discovering the hidden veins of other individual revolts seeking complicity, and in these hidden veins perhaps finding the embryo of a new social movement.

In any case, this intervention, in refusing politics and its methods, becomes a tension toward revolution and freedom in life and struggle, perpetually pushing against the grain for the destruction of all domination and exploitation, for the end of every practice of specialization and representation including that of specialized activism. It is the tension that springs from knowing what one desires and at the same time knowing that one is facing a world that is designed to prevent one from realizing that desire—knowing, in other words, that one’s life is a battle. It is, at the same time, the tension of the complicity of desires in which the differences between individuals create the interweaving harmonies of affinity that indicate the direction for a new truly free way of living. It is in this tension that the specific self-organization of consciously anarchist revolt can find the way to intertwine with the daily struggles of all the exploited at the points where those struggles begin to experiment with direct action and self-organization. A new world based on joy and the exploration of our desires is possible; it will begin to grow wherever the self-organization of revolt against this world flows into the self-organization of life itself.
Occupy Wall Street's Anarchist Roots

by David Graeber

Almost every time I'm interviewed by a mainstream journalist about Occupy Wall Street I get some variation of the same lecture:

"How are you going to get anywhere if you refuse to create a leadership structure or make a practical list of demands? And what's with all this anarchist nonsense—the consensus, the sparkly fingers? Don't you realise all this radical language is going to alienate people? You're never going to be able to reach regular, mainstream Americans with this sort of thing!"

If one were compiling a scrapbook of worst advice ever given, this sort of thing might well merit an honourable place. After all, since the financial crash of 2007, there have been dozens of attempts to kick-off a national movement against the depredations of the United States' financial elites taking the approach such journalists recommended. All failed. It was only on August 2, when a small group of anarchists and other anti-authoritarians showed up at a meeting called by one such group and effectively wooed everyone away from the planned march and rally to create a genuine democratic assembly, on basically anarchist principles, that the stage was set for a movement that Americans from Portland to Tuscaloosa were willing to embrace.

I should be clear here what I mean by "anarchist principles." The easiest way to explain anarchism is to say that it is a political movement that aims to bring about a genuinely free society—that is, one where humans only enter those kinds of relations with one another that would not have to be enforced by the constant threat of violence. History has shown that vast inequalities of wealth, institutions like slavery, debt peonage or wage labour, can only exist if backed up by armies, prisons, and police. Anarchists wish to see human relations that would not have to be backed up by armies, prisons, and police. Anarchism envisions a society based on equality and solidarity, which could exist solely on the free consent of participants.

Anarchism versus Marxism

Traditional Marxism, of course, aspired to the same ultimate goal but there was a key difference. Most Marxists insisted that it was necessary first to seize state power, and all the mechanisms of bureaucratic violence that come with it, and use them to transform society—to the point where they argued such mechanisms would, ultimately, become redundant and fade away. Even back in the 19th century, anarchists argued that this was a pipe dream. One cannot, they argued, create peace by training for war, equality by creating top-down chains of command, or, for that matter, human happiness by becoming grim joyless revolutionaries who sacrifice all personal self-realisation or self-fulfilment to the cause.

It's not just that the ends do not justify the means (though they don't), you will never achieve the ends at all unless the means are themselves a model for the world you wish to create. Hence the famous anarchist call to begin "building the new society in the shell of the old" with egalitarian experiments ranging from free schools to radical labour unions to rural communes.

Anarchism was also a revolutionary ideology, and its emphasis on individual conscience and individual initiative meant that during the first heyday of revolutionary anarchism between roughly 1875 and 1914, many took the fight directly to heads of state and capitalists, with bombings and assassinations. Hence the popular image of the anarchist bomb-thrower. It's worthy of note that anarchists were perhaps the first political movement to realise that terrorism, even if not directed at innocents, doesn't work. For nearly a century now, in fact, anarchism has been one of the very few political philosophies whose exponents never blow anyone up (indeed, the 20th-century political leader who drew most from the anarchist tradition was Mohandas K Gandhi).

Yet for the period of roughly 1914 to 1989, a period during which the world was continually either fighting or preparing for world wars, anarchism went into something of an eclipse for precisely that reason: to seem "realistic", in such violent times, a political movement had to be capable of organising armies, navies, and ballistic missile systems, and that was one thing at which Marxists could often excel. But everyone recognised that anarchists—rather to their credit—would never be able to pull it off. It was only after 1989, when the age of great war mobilisations seemed to have ended, that a global revolutionary movement based on anarchist principles—the global justice movement—promptly reappeared.

How, then, did OWS embody anarchist principles? It might be helpful to go over this point by point:

1) The refusal to recognise the legitimacy of existing political institutions

One reason for the much-discussed refusal to issue demands is because issuing demands means recognising the legitimacy—or at least, the power—of those of whom the demands are made. Anarchists often note that this is the difference between protest and direct action: Protest, however militant, is an appeal to the authorities to behave differently;
direct action, whether it's a matter of a community building a well or making salt in defiance of the law (Gandhi's example again), trying to shut down a meeting or occupy a factory, is a matter of acting as if the existing structure of power does not even exist. Direct action is, ultimately, the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free.

2) The refusal to accept the legitimacy of the existing legal order

The second principle, obviously, follows from the first. From the very beginning, when we first started holding planning meetings in Tompkins Square Park in New York, organisers knowingly ignored local ordinances that insisted that any gathering of more than twelve people in a public park is illegal without police permission—simply on the grounds that such laws should not exist. On the same grounds, of course, we chose to occupy a park, inspired by examples from the Middle East and southern Europe, on the grounds that, as the public, we should not need permission to occupy public space. This might have been a very minor form of civil disobedience but it was crucial that we began with a commitment to answer only to a moral order, not a legal one.

3) The refusal to create an internal hierarchy, but instead to create a form of consensus-based direct democracy

From the very beginning, too, organisers made the audacious decision to operate not only by direct democracy, without leaders, but by consensus. The first decision ensured that there would be no formal leadership structure that could be co-opted or coerced; the second, that no majority could bend a minority to its will, but that all crucial decisions had to be made by general consent. American anarchists have long considered consensus process (a tradition that has emerged from a confluence of feminism, anarchism, and spiritual traditions like the Quakers) crucial for the reason that it is the only form of decision-making that could operate without coercive enforcement—since if a majority does not have the means to compel a minority to obey its dictates, all decisions will, of necessity, have to be made by general consent.

4) The embrace of prefigurative politics

As a result, Zuccotti Park, and all subsequent encampments, became spaces of experiment with creating the institutions of a new society—not only democratic General Assemblies but kitchens, libraries, clinics, media centres, and a host of other institutions, all operating on anarchist principles of mutual aid and self-organisation—a genuine attempt to create the institutions of a new society in the shell of the old.

Why did it work? Why did it catch on? One reason is, clearly, because most Americans are far more willing to embrace radical ideas than any ideas in the established media is willing to admit. The basic message—that the American political order is absolutely and irredeemably corrupt, that both parties have been bought and sold by the wealthiest 1% of the population, and that if we are to live in any sort of genuinely democratic society, we're going to have to start from scratch—clearly struck a profound chord in the American psyche.

Perhaps this is not surprising: We are facing conditions that rival those of the 1930s, the main difference being that the media seems stubbornly unwilling to acknowledge it. It raises intriguing questions about the role of the media itself in American society. Radical critics usually assume the "corporate media", as they call it, mainly exists to convince the public that existing institutions are healthy, legitimate, and just. It is becoming increasingly apparent that at the moment the media do not really see this is possible; rather, their role is simply to convince members of an increasingly angry public that no one else has come to the same conclusions they have. The result is an ideology that no one really believes, but most people at least suspect that everybody else does.

Nowhere is this disjunction between what ordinary Americans really think, and what the media and political establishment tells them they think, more clear than when we talk about democracy.

Democracy in America?

According to the official version, of course, "democracy" is a system created by the Founding Fathers, based on checks and balances between president, congress, and judiciary. In fact, nowhere in the Declaration of Independence or Constitution does it say anything about the US being a "democracy". The authors of those documents, almost to a man, defined "democracy" as a matter of collective self-governance by popular assemblies, and as such they were dead-set against it.

Democracy meant the madness of crowds: bloody, tumultuous, and untenable. "There was never a democracy that didn't commit suicide," wrote Adams; Hamilton justified the system of checks and balances by insisting that it was necessary to create a permanent body of the "rich and well-born" to check the "imprudence" of democracy, or even that limited form that would be allowed in the lower house of representatives.

The result was a republic—modelled not on Athens, but on Rome. It only came to be redefined as a "democracy" in the early 19th century because ordinary Americans had very different views, and persistently tended to vote—those who were allowed to vote—for candidates who called themselves "democrats". But what did—and what do—ordinary Americans mean by the word? Did they really just mean a system where they get to weigh in on which politicians will run the government? It seems implausible. After all, most Americans loathe politicians, and tend
to be skeptical about the very idea of government. If they universally hold out "democracy" as their political ideal, it can only be because they still see it, however vaguely, as self-governance—as what the Founding Fathers tended to denounce as either "democracy" or, as they sometimes also put it, "anarchy".

If nothing else, this would help explain the enthusiasm with which Americans have embraced a movement based on directly democratic principles, despite the uniformly contemptuous dismissal of the United States' media and political class.

In fact, this is not the first time a movement based on fundamentally anarchist principles—direct action, direct democracy, a rejection of existing political institutions and an attempt to create alternative ones—has cropped up in the US. The civil rights movement (at least its more radical branches), the anti-nuclear movement, and the global justice movement all took similar directions. Never, however, has one grown so startlingly quickly. But in part, this is because this time around, the organisers went straight for the central contradiction. They directly challenged the pretenses of the ruling elite that they are presiding over a democracy.

When it comes to their most basic political sensibilities, most Americans are deeply conflicted. Most combine a deep reverence for individual freedom with a near-worshipful identification with institutions like the army and police. Most combine an enthusiasm for markets with a hatred of capitalists. Most are simultaneously profoundly egalitarian and deeply racist. Few are actual anarchists; few even know what "anarchism" means; it's not clear how many, if they did learn, would ultimately wish to discard the state and capitalism entirely. Anarchism is much more than simply grassroots democracy; it ultimately aims to eliminate all social relations, from wage labour to patriarchy, that can only be maintained by the systematic threat of force.

But one thing overwhelming numbers of Americans do feel is that something is terribly wrong with their country, that its key institutions are controlled by an arrogant elite, that radical change of some kind is long since overdue. They're right. It's hard to imagine a political system so systematically corrupt—one where bribery, on every level, has not only been made legal, but soliciting and dispensing bribes has become the full-time occupation of every American politician. The outrage is appropriate. The problem is that up until September 17, the only side of the spectrum willing to propose radical solutions of any sort was the Right.

As the history of the past movements all make clear; nothing terrifies those running the US more than the danger of democracy breaking out. The immediate response to even a modest spark of democratically organised civil disobedience is a panicked combination of concessions and brutality. How else can one explain the recent national mobilisation of thousands of riot cops, the beatings, chemical attacks, and mass arrests of citizens engaged in precisely the kind of democratic assemblies the Bill of Rights was designed to protect, and whose only crime—if any—was the violation of local camping regulations?

Our media pundits might insist that if average Americans ever realised the anarchist role in Occupy Wall Street, they would turn away in shock and horror; but our rulers seem, rather, to labour under a lingering fear that if any significant number of Americans do find out what anarchism really is, they might well decide that rulers of any sort are unnecessary.
industrial capitalism first started to emerge in the early nineteenth century, its machinations were relatively visible. Take, for instance, the enclosures. Pasturelands that had been used in common for centuries to provide villages with their very sustenance were systematically fenced off—enclosed—in order to graze sheep, whose wool was needed for the burgeoning textile industry. Communal life was briskly thrust aside in favor of privatization, forcing people into harsh factories and crowded cities.

Advanced capitalism, as it pushes past the fetters of even nation-states in its insatiable quest for growth, encloses life in a much more expansive yet generally invisible way: fences are replaced by consumer culture. We are raised in an almost totally commodified world where nothing comes for free, not even futile attempts to remove oneself from the market economy. This commodification seeps into not only what we eat, wear, or do for fun but also into our language, relationships, and even our very biology and minds. We have lost not only our communities and public spaces but control over our own lives; we have lost the ability to define ourselves outside capitalism's grip, and thus genuine meaning itself begins to dissolve.

"Whose Streets? Our Streets!" then, is a legitimate emotional response to the feeling that even the most minimal of public, noncommodified spheres has been taken from us. Yet in the end, it is simply a frantic cry from our cage. We have become so confined, so thoroughly damaged, by capitalism as well as state control, that crumbs appear to make a nourishing meal.

Temporarily closing off the streets during direct actions does provide momentary spaces in which to practice democratic process, and even offers a sense of empowerment, but such events leave power for power's sake, like the very pavement beneath our feet, unchanged. Only when the serial protest mode is escalated into a struggle for popular or horizontal power can we create cracks in the figurative concrete, thereby opening up ways to challenge capitalism, nation-states, and other systems of domination.

This is not to denigrate the contemporary direct action movement in the United States and elsewhere; just the opposite. Besides a long overdue and necessary critique of numerous institutions of command and obedience, it is quietly yet crucially supplying the outlines of a freer society. This prefigurative politics is, in fact, the very strength and vision of direct action, where the means themselves are understood to intimately relate to the ends. We're not putting off the good society until some distant future but attempting to carve out room for it in the here and now, however tentative and contorted under the given social order. In turn, this consistency of means and ends implies an ethical approach to politics. How we act now is how we want others to begin to act, too. We try to model a notion of goodness even as we fight for it.

This can implicitly be seen in the affinity group and spokescouncil structures for decision making at direct actions. Both supply much needed spaces in which to school ourselves in direct democracy. Here, in the best of cases, we can proactively set the agenda, carefully deliberate together over questions, and come to decisions that strive to take everyone's needs and desires into account. Substantive discussion replaces checking boxes on a ballot; face-to-face participation replaces handing over our lives to so-called representatives; nuanced and reasoned solutions replace lesser-of-two-(or-three)-evils thinking. The democratic process utilized during demonstrations decentralizes power even as it offers tangible solidarity; for example, affinity groups afford greater and more diverse numbers of people a real share in decision making, while spokescouncils allow for intricate coordination—even on a global level. This is, as 1960s activists put it, the power to create rather than to destroy.

The beauty of the direct action movement, it could be said, is that it strives to take its own ideals to heart. In doing so, it has perhaps unwittingly created the demand for such directly democratic practices on a permanent basis. Yet the perplexing question underlying episodic "street democracy" remains unaddressed: how can everyone come together to make decisions that affect society as a whole in participatory, mutualistic, and ethical ways? In other words, how can each and every one of us—not just a counterculture or a protest movement—really transform and ultimately control our lives and that of our communities?

This is, in essence, a question of power—who has it, how it is used, and to what ends. To varying degrees, we all know the answer in relation to current institutions and systems. We can generally explain what we are against. That is exactly why we are protesting, whether it is against capitalism or climate change, summits or war. What we have largely failed to articulate, however, is any sort of response in relation to liberatory institutions and systems. We often can't express, especially in any coherent and utopian manner, what we are for. Even as we prefigure a way of making power horizontal, equitable, and hence, we hope an essential part of a free society, we ignore the reconstructive vision that a directly democratic process holds up right in front of our noses.

For all intents and purposes, direct action protests remain trapped. On the one hand, they reveal and confront domination and exploitation. The political pressure exerted by such widespread agitation may even be able to influence current power structures to amend some of the worst excesses of their ways; the powers-that-be have to listen, and respond to some extent, when the voices become too numerous and too loud. Nevertheless, most people are still shut out of the decision-making process itself, and consequently, have little tangible power over their lives at all. Without this ability to self-govern, street actions translate into nothing
more than a countercultural version of interest group lobbying, albeit far more radical than most and generally unpaid.

What gets forgotten in relation to direct action mobilizations is the promise implicit in their own structure: that power not only needs to be contested; it must also be constituted anew in liberatory and egalitarian forms. This entails taking directly democratic processes seriously—not simply as a tactic to organize protests but as the very way we organize society, specifically the political realm. The issue then becomes: how do we begin to shift the strategy, structure, and values of direct action in the streets, to the most grassroots level of public policy making?

The most fundamental level of decision making in a demonstration is the affinity group. Here, we come together as friends or because of a common identity, or a combination of the two. We share something in particular; indeed, this common identity is often reflected in the name we choose for our groups. We may not always agree with each other, but there is a fair amount of homogeneity precisely because we've consciously chosen to come together for a specific reason—usually having little to do with mere geography. This sense of a shared identity allows for the smooth functioning of a consensus decision-making process, since we start from a place of commonality. In an affinity group, almost by definition, our unity needs to take precedence over our diversity, or our supposed affinity breaks down altogether.

Compare this to what could be the most fundamental level of decision making in a society: a neighborhood or town. Now, geography plays a much larger role. Out of historic, economic, cultural, religious, and other reasons, we may find ourselves living side by side with a wide range of individuals and their various identities. Most of these people are not our friends per se. Still, the very diversity we encounter is the life of a vibrant city itself. The accidents and/or numerous personal decisions that have brought us together frequently create a fair amount of heterogeneity precisely because we haven't all chosen to come together for a specific reason. In this context, where we start from a place of difference, decision-making mechanisms need to be much more capable of allowing for dissent; that is, diversity needs to be clearly retained within any notions of unity. As such, majoritarian decision-making processes begin to make more sense.

Then, too, there is the question of scale. It is hard to imagine being friends with thousands, or even hundreds, of people, nor maintaining a single-issue identity with that many individuals. But we can share a feeling of community and a striving toward some common good that allows each of us to flourish. In turn, when greater numbers of people come together on a face-to-face basis to reshape their neighborhoods and towns, the issues as well as the viewpoints will multiply, and alliances will no

...
Indeed, many decisions have a much wider impact than on just one city; transforming streets, for example, would probably entail coordination on a regional, continental, or even global level. Radicals have long understood such mutualistic self-reliance as a “commune of communes,” or confederation. The spokescouncil model used during direct actions hints at such an alternative view of globalization. During a spokescouncil meeting, mandated delegates from our affinity groups gather for the purpose of coordination, the sharing of resources/skills, the building of solidarity, and so forth, always returning to the grassroots level as the ultimate arbiter. If popular assemblies were our basic unit of decision making, confederations of communities could serve as a way to both transcend parochialism and create interdependence where desirable. For instance, rather than global capitalism and international regulatory bodies (where trade is top-down and profit-oriented), confederations could coordinate distribution between regions in ecological and humane ways, while allowing policy in regard to production, say, to remain at the grassroots.

This more expansive understanding of a prefigurative politics would necessarily involve creating institutions that could potentially replace capitalism and nation-states. Such directly democratic institutions are compatible with, and could certainly grow out of, the ones we use during demonstrations, but they very likely won’t be mirror images once we reach the level of society. This does not mean abandoning the principles and ideals underpinning direct action mobilizations (such as freedom, cooperation, decentralism, solidarity, diversity, and face-to-face participation); it merely means recognizing the limits of direct democracy as it is practiced in the context of an anticapitalist convergence.

The Zapatistas, along with other revolutionaries before them, have already shown that declarations of freedom “touch the hearts of humble and simple people like ourselves, but people who are also, like ourselves, dignified and rebel.” Yet starting in 2001, they have proved as well that municipalities can strive to become autonomous from statecraft and capital, to put human and ecological concerns first, while retaining regional and global links of solidarity and mutual aid. “This method of autonomous government was not simply invented by the EZLN [Zapatista Army of National Liberation], but rather it comes from several centuries of indigenous resistance and from the Zapatistas’ own experience. It is the self-governance of the communities. In other words, no one from outside comes to govern, but the peoples themselves decide, among themselves, who governs and how... And, also through the Good Government Junta, coordination has been improved between the Autonomous Municipalities.” Among other achievements, these self-governments also facilitated “much improvement in the projects in the communities. Health and education have improved, although there is still a good deal lacking for it to be what it should be. The same is true for housing and food.”

Another recent example was the neighborhood assembly movement that sprang up in Argentina in 2001–2, in response to an economic crisis that simultaneously delegitimized parliamentary politics. In late December 2001, a spiraling sense of desperation and powerlessness combined to force people not only out onto the streets to loudly protest by banging on pots and pans (and destroying ATMs) but also into an empowering dialogue with their neighbors about what to do next—on the local, national, and global levels. Some fifty neighborhoods in Buenos Aires began holding weekly meetings and sending delegates every Sunday to an interneighborhood general coordinating gathering. The anarchist Argentine Libertarian Federation Local Council explains that the assemblies were “formed by the unemployed, the underemployed, and people marginalized and excluded from capitalist society: including professionals, workers, small retailers, artists, craftspeople, all of them also neighbors.” As the Libertarian Federation notes, “The meetings are open and anyone who wishes can participate,” and common to all assemblies was the “non-delegation of power, self-management, [and a] horizontal structure.” While these assemblies didn’t end up replacing the state structure, they did supply Argentineans with a glimpse of their own ability to make public policy together. “The fear in our society has turned into courage,” the Libertarian Federation reports. “There is reason to hope that all Argentineans now know for certain who has been blocking our freedoms.”

Indeed, such innovative efforts, even when they fall short of social transformation, end up inspiring other attempts. The current series of building occupations on college campuses across the state of California, sparked by dramatic tuition increases and budget cuts to public education in fall 2009, draws on the recent Oaxacan rebellion of 2006. As La Ventana Collective, made up of students at San Francisco State University, writes, “The APPO (the Popular People’s Assembly of Oaxaca) organized large general assemblies held in the midst of the occupation of the zocalo of the capital city of the state of Oaxaca. The ‘plantón’—or occupation—was a space where meetings took up to three days in many cases due to the horizontal nature and directly democratic principles of the APPO, which functioned as guidelines and principles of the movement. These students assert in relation to their own ongoing resistance that “a general assembly is, for us, a large gathering of people willing to talk about the issues through discussion in order to formulate plans for moving forward.” Looking ahead as students, faculty, staff, workers, and community supporters around California gear up for further contestation, including a “Strike and Day of Action in Defense of Public Education” called for March 4, 2010, La Ventana points to the significance of “the communization of the struggle... This is a philosophy that was stressed...
during the 2001 horizontalist movement in Argentina after the collapse of the economy. Once again, during the actions that followed the collapse of the government, the people self-organized." For the San Francisco State University students, the lived reality of directly democratic processes during their own struggle is just as important as winning that struggle; it is, in fact, part and parcel of winning.

Such instantiations of self-governance don't appear out of thin air. They take, among other things, patience, deliberation, self-reflection, and imagination. They take courage. The Zapatistas spent ten years "talking with and listening to other people like us," joining "forces in silence," learning and getting "organized in order to defend ourselves and to fight for justice." Then, "when the rich were throwing their New Year's Eve parties, we fell upon their cities and just took them over" on December 31, 1993. "And then the people from the cities went out into the streets and began shouting for an end to the war. And then we stopped our war, and we listened to those brothers and sisters... And so we set aside the fire and took up the word." Still, it would take another seven years, until 2001, before the EZLN would begin "encouraging the autonomous rebel Zapatista municipalities—which is how the peoples are organized in order to govern and to govern themselves—in order to make themselves stronger."

At worst, such fragile yet exceedingly beautiful experiments will forever change those people who participate in them, for the better, by "self-mentoring" a new generation of rebels through the lived practice of freely constituting one's community collectively. They will provide material and moral support, and serve as the continuity between other similar efforts, in other parts of the world. And they will also supply messages in bottles to future generations that directly democratic, confederated ways of making social, economic, political, and cultural decisions are a tangible alternative. This is a pretty good "worst-case scenario," as the horizontal movement of movements of the past couple decades attests to—from Chilapas to Buenos Aires to Oaxaca, from Greece to North America. At best, though, such forms of freedom will widen into dual powers that can contest and ultimately replace forms of domination. They will become the basis for a new politics of self-legislation, self-management, and self-adjudication, forever shattering the bleak world of states, capital, and prisons.

Any vision of a free society, if it is to be truly democratic, must, of course be worked out by all of us—first in movements, and later, in our communities and federations. Even so, we will probably discover that newly defined understandings of what it means to be a politically engaged person are needed in place of affinity groups; hybrid consensus-seeking and majoritarian methods of decision making that strive to retain diversity are preferable to simple consensus and informal models; written compacts articulating rights and duties are crucial to fill out the unspoken culture of protests; and institutionalized spaces for policymaking are key to guaranteeing that our freedom to make decisions doesn't disappear with a line of riot police.

It is time to push beyond the oppositional character of the direct action movement by infusing it with a reconstructive vision. That means beginning, right now, to translate movement structures into institutions that embody the good society; in short, cultivating direct democracy in the places we call home. This will involve the harder work of reinvigorating or initiating civic gatherings, town meetings, neighborhood assemblies, community mediation boards, any and all forums where we can come together to decide our lives, even if only in extralegal institutions at first. Then, too, it will mean reclaiming globalization, not as a new phase of capitalism, but as its replacement by confederated, directly democratic communities coordinated for mutual benefit.

It is time to move from protest to politics, from shutting down streets to opening up public space, from demanding scraps from those few in power to holding power firmly in all our hands. Ultimately, this means moving beyond the question of "Whose Streets?" We should ask, instead, "Whose Cities?" Then, and only then, will we be able to remake them as our own.

Footnotes
1. Throughout this chapter, the "direct action movement" refers to the time period ranging, approximately, from the Zapatista uprising in January 1994 and the subsequent global anticapitalist movement of movements, to today's climate justice movement, Greek rebellion, and wave of occupations.
5. Sixth Declaration, "I. - What We Are" and "II. - Where We Are Now."