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It is late August 2012. Dozens of people are sitting and standing in a circle in Tompkins Square Park, planning the actions to commemorate the one-year anniversary of Occupy Wall Street. We are literally in the same place, even under the same tree, where the assemblies to plan the initial September 17 occupation took place a year ago. There are a few of the same faces, and many many new ones. As I stand there reflecting on what it means to be in exactly the same geographic spot, yet in an entirely different world, a young man bounces up to me. He is an artist and has played a consistent role in organizing Occupy since last summer. He almost always bounces rather than walks, and his eyes usually gleam with happiness. After a long hug by way of greeting he asks me, “Do you think we should be depressed?” His eyes are not sparkling as much as usual, and I am taken aback by the question. Depressed? Why? I had just been thinking about how far we had come.

Many people think Occupy has been a failure, he says. Hundreds of parks and plazas around the country are no longer occupied, and we are no longer in the mainstream news, and people are saying that we do not have a plan. But, I say, and he also says, and we both agree: these seem like the wrong metrics. At the same time, what would the right metrics be?

The conversation was a familiar one. In June I traveled to Athens, Greece. Almost immediately after saying hello, a friend from a neighborhood assembly said to me, “Marina, you have to understand, the situation here is much worse, it is not like we thought it would be, we are not succeeding.” Only half the population of Athens was expecting to pay the newly imposed tax on the electric bill, he said. And the coordination among the more than 50 neighborhood assemblies in Athens was not as concrete as it should be, and, even more frustrating, many neighbors were coming to their local assemblies for support, but were no longer participating regularly. Maybe I looked like I was going to laugh, because he proceeded to remind me that in November of 2011, the expectations for the movement were quite high: some spoke of dual power and others of revolution.

What does success mean? Who decides? By what standards? What has taken place? means? What has taken place over the course of this last year? September 17, 2011, marked the beginning of a new refusal in the US. Joining our sisters and brothers around the globe, who in the years prior were declaring Enough!, as in Mexico and Greece, to كفنا! (Enough) in Egypt, and They All Must Go! in Argentina. Together we are not only refusing—we are not just saying no! In each place, in ways that are unique and remarkably similar at the same time, we are affirming ourselves and our power. This is the power of the slogan the 99% or Real Democracy Ya! It is a claim of who we are and a recognition of that power.

Around the world there has been a move from the occupation of large plazas to the creation of neighborhood assemblies, weaving assemblies and actions into the fabric of everyday life. The movements have left the large public plazas to root themselves in workplaces and schools. In Greece, the refusal to pay the new electricity tax is organized through local neighborhood assemblies. Then, when the electricity is cut off, it is also the neighborhood assembly that reconnects it. Sometimes the assembly breaks into the records office of the electric company and destroys records of debt. This is all done through local assemblies coordinating on regional levels. Similar actions are also taking place with regard to increased costs to basic health care. Again the neighborhood assemblies block the cashiers in the hospitals so that people do not have to pay. Additionally people are organizing barter networks, through local assemblies that then have more regional connections.

Here in New York we have seen the appearance of numerous local assemblies, which in some cases work directly to defend neighbors from evictions or to support their struggle for the right to affordable and dignified housing, as in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Occupy assemblies have appeared in each of the college and university campuses of the public city university system in New York, coordinating together to resist cuts and proposed tuition increases, as well as to create a space for a “free university experimenting with new forms pedagogy, led and coordinated by students.

Throughout the United States, in large cities and small towns, people inspired by the politics and tactics of Occupy have been organizing to defend people from evictions, from the neighborhood of Bernal Heights in San Francisco to suburbs in midwestern Minnesota and Iowa. The form is the same. Neighbors come together, sometimes going door to door, sometimes meeting in a person’s home, and discuss who is at risk of foreclosure and what to do about it, often physically defending homes from eviction as well as petitioning for new terms for living in the home with the bank. Anyone who has been to one of these home defenses, or even looked at the photos, will quickly get a sense of what this means: teenagers in sports jackets, mothers holding children, grandparents and neighbors and activists, all together gather to prevent an eviction or foreclosure from taking place. In most cases they win, forcing the banks to allow people to keep their homes instead of being cast out on the street.

For example, in the Bernal Heights neighborhood of San Francisco, a few neighbors came together first to help defend a longtime resident who was facing foreclosure. After a long battle, they were able to force the bank to renegotiate his mortgage to one that he could afford. From there, a number of women began a door knocking campaign where they went house to house asking if people were facing foreclosure and if they wanted to fight. As Molly, one of the first participants in Occupy Bernal explained, We’ve stopped a lot of auctions—that’s kind of a last-ditch effort, once the home is getting auctioned off. We’re trying to stop the foreclosures before that. And now we’re starting to think about how we need to talk to people before they even get into foreclosure, because the more time we have the better it is, if we’re really trying to save people’s homes... A lot of people were skeptical at first, but there are people who’ve gotten their loans modified through work that we’ve done—their home would have been auctioned off; they would have been evicted. We feel like we’re doing something for our neighbors at least. And one thing that I found out, once we started asking who was in foreclosure—we found out who they were: they were almost all people of color. This is a very diverse neighborhood, but I would say most of the people who live here are white people; so that people of color were the ones who the bank targeted for these bad loans. So it feels to me like—this is the main reason that I’m active in this—that the face of my neighborhood is getting changed every day by the banks, these big banks that made fraudulent loans to my neighbors. I’m just outraged. I’m outraged all the time anyway, but this is really outrageous.

Similar stories are being told throughout the US, and many housing defenses are taking place that I am sure are not known about, that are not in the media or even the alternative press. As Molly and others from Occupy Bernal explain, they began to organize to defend their neighbors. It was and is the most basic thing to do—to speak with the person living next to you and organize together. This sort of direct action, facilitated by neighborhood assemblies, is part of what Occupy has inspired. This is where Occupy has come in less than a year.

Within workplaces the movement is still beginning, but the relationship of the Occupy movement to those involved in labor struggles is deepening and profound. Labor laws that threaten workers for taking action on the job have created such fear that there is often little fighting back within a workplace during business hours. However, there has been an increasing relationship with workers in struggle and movement participants. For example, in my neighborhood in Kensington, Brooklyn, a local community group, together with the new Occupy in the neighborhood, have begun to support worker’s efforts to organize a union. The workers themselves fear losing their jobs, so they do not join the picket and flyering outside, but the movement has been successfully keeping neighbors from shopping in the grocery store (Golden Farms) and is increasing the pressure on the owners to recognize workers’ rights. Just last week, workers have won at Hot and Crusty, a cafe on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where they have been organizing a union for almost a year. This victory would not have taken place without the support of community groups, labor and Occupy. Workers from the cafe began coming to Occupy meetings last fall, and with the support of the community and movements have maintained pressure inside the workplace. Then, once they were locked out, workers received movement participants’ support in maintaining an ongoing action outside the cafe, handing out food and coffee on a donation basis, as well as educating the neighborhood as to what was taking place. Finally, due to the pressure, the owners now have agreed to recognize the union and will reopen the cafe as a...
union shop. These are significant victories that demonstrate the powerful relationship between workers in struggle and Occupy. Similarly in Spain, when there is a struggle and workers ask for support, movement participants will sometimes physically block all people from entering a workplace so that it is effectively shut down, even if the workers cannot “legally” strike. In this way direct action by the movement directly supports the struggle of the workers, yet without placing the workers in any danger. The desired results of a strike still occur through solidarity action.

NOT JUST WHAT, BUT HOW

There is no question as to the amount of Occupy-inspired actions across the country. What I have mentioned above is only the tip of the iceberg. But more important than making a list of what is happening under the umbrella of Occupy is how it is all taking place. People are coming together in horizontal assemblies and deciding what to do. No one is waiting on a political party or a boss or leader to come and tell them what to do and how, but we are looking to one another and figuring it out together. It is not about asking but about doing. It is from a point of affirming our power together and not from a position of weakness.

In Argentina, ten years after the popular rebellion, an interesting phenomenon arose with regard to the question of success of the movements. Young people, and even those in their 30s, who were generally teens or in their 20s during the rebellion, have begun to refer to themselves as Hijos (children) of the 19th and 20th. What they mean by this is not that they became political during the rebellion of December 19th and 20th, 2001, though many of them did. What they mean is that the way that they organize today, with assemblies, using horizontalidad, was created by the rebellion. What it means to be a child of the 19th and 20th lies in the forms of social relationships and the seeing of means as a part of the ends. Nicolas and Gisela, two movement participants explained this as follows in 2010: “[We say] we are the children of 2001 because we were formed by everything we lived within the assemblies, the factories, and everything that happened in the streets, it is there that we learned these cooperative principles of horizontalidad.”

CAN ONE MEASURE A DREAM?

Social movements are made up of people. People with ideas and dreams, dreams for themselves, dreams for the collective, and dreams for the movements and the world. Sometimes these movement dreams and goals measure up with those of social scientists who study movements, claiming to know what a successful movement is. Which I guess is like saying they know the dreams of the movement participants. Some theorists argue, for example, that the Occupy movement must ultimately take state and institutional power to be successful. Some Occupy movement participants however often say that dignity and freedom in their relationships is what they desire and dream. Who is right? Are the people who tell me that I need to own a home and have a well-paying job to be happy truly arguing I am not happy because I do not? Can one really argue that a movement is not successful because it did not meet the goals a person has imposed on the movement?

Who decides success? Success has to be decided by those people in struggle, those who are fighting or organizing for something.

Success of a movement, movement goals and people’s desires come from those people, those social actors, not those studying them or politically desiring to lead them. In fact, it is against this way of thinking and organizing that the Occupy movement was born. It was a rupture with people telling us what to do and how to do it. This includes not only governments and politicians, but also left political parties, journalists, and scholars.

One year after Occupy we have a success already. When people begin to organize all over the country they are doing so with assemblies, struggling against hierarchy, thinking about the question of leadership and power, and trying to create ways where all can be leaders. When people are organizing today it might not always be with the word Occupy, but the spirit of assemblies, direct action, and creating power together is there for sure. The mark of Occupy is there for sure.
“INFINITELY MORE THAN NOTHING”

Last summer I heard through the grapevine that a small group was meeting weekly in Tompkins Square Park to plan a protest against Wall Street. A few friends invited me to attend, but I never made the time. I had been to a couple of demonstrations in the financial district and none had made me feel particularly empowered or inspired. I wasn’t very optimistic that this time would be different.

Still, on September 17th, 2011, I got up and took the subway into Manhattan, answering the call that had been issued to come and Occupy Wall Street. While there was hardly a mass uprising underground—I would have estimated maybe four hundred people, tops—something was clearly different. There were plenty of people I didn’t recognize, which was striking, and many looked to be quite young, evidence of a new generation of politicians. And while everyone chanted for a few blocks as the group made its way up Broadway to a park I had never been to before (“Zuccotti Park?” someone said, when I asked where we were), the afternoon was not spent marching and shouting but sitting and talking. As the crowd spilled into the innocuous plaza everyone began convening in small circles. Those of us who happened to be standing near each other sat down on the concrete. We said our names and began to share, one by one, why we were there and what we thought could be done. When the conversation ended a few hours later we all agreed, if nothing else, to meet again. That was my first experience of a general assembly.

By then dusk had settled and the little impromptu groups were converging into a single large circle to discuss how to proceed. The police ringing the periphery of the park looked menacing, and while some people had sleeping bags I didn’t think they would be able to stay the night, so I slipped away and headed home. I had seen the crackdown on dissent in the wake of 9/11 and expected the worst. I returned the next day. As I turned the corner to catch a glimpse of the little park in the shadow of the Freedom Tower, I was amazed to see they had made it to day two. Never in my wildest dreams would I have guessed we’d see Occupy continue into a second year.

+++

Occupy Wall Street burst onto the scene like nothing before it, or at least nothing I’ve ever known. In the months leading up to the occupation, protests were a virtual, vicarious experience for most of us. We watched tweets stream in from Iran or tuned into Al Jazeera as demonstrators flooded Tahrir Square. We saw tens of thousands of people march over Wall Street (the original, American state) was in revolt, yet the rest of the country, and New York City in particular, felt as complacent as ever. An early and profound success of Occupy was breaking that sense of complacency. A few weeks ago a friend told me that they have been less depressed since Occupy Wall Street started, and I nodded, saying I understood. Just knowing other people are outraged is a kind of tonic.

Still, Occupy always aimed for far more than just making a few sensitive souls feel less alone. It aspires, ambitiously and uncompromisingly, to the complete transformation of our society and the principles that guide it. By that immensely high standard, Occupy has been a rather spectacular failure. And yet here I am, a year later, more involved in the day to day of the movement than I was at its apex last year. I see more potential in what Occupy has sparked than I did on the first day.

When I share this fact with people they often pause, a bit conflicted or confused. Many believe that Occupy is over—squashed by the police or run out of steam—and thus wonder how I can be part of a movement that no longer exists? Others have been persuaded by the mainstream news media that Occupy was little more than a clueless uprising of malcontents or quasi-criminals—not something, in other words, that I should be shamelessly declaring my affinity for (these people may have seen the ads bashing Elizabeth Warren that paint occupiers as undesirables who “attack police, do drugs and trash public parks,” or watched the preview for Andrew Breitbart’s posthumous documentary Occupy Unmasked, or simply read the New York Times or Huffington Post on an off day.) A third group seems subtly dismayed when I speak of my continuing work with Occupy. These are typically change-loving liberals who, for some reason or another, never got involved in the protests against Wall Street. The sight of people in the streets was inspiring to them but also, it seems, slightly irrat ing, a source of imagined retribution. They wouldn’t mind if the protests were finished, and with it the sense of being guilted and goaded by the knowledge that others are taking action.

Faced with these reactions, talking to acquaintances about Occupy Wall Street often leaves me with mixed emotions. Sometimes, speaking about my involvement with the movement makes me feel proud, like I’m part of something significant and still unfinished, a worthy endeavor even if the outcome is uncertain. But just as often it’s disorienting. I’ll have the sudden sense I’m part of some doomed, antiquated effort (what could be more retro than a protest movement?) or feel as though I’m admitting to delusions of grandeur (I must be crazy to sit in meetings where people earnestly talk about overthrowing capitalism). At other moments it feels like exposing an embarrassing underbelly, revealing a silly, naïve idealism responsible adults are supposed to outgrow.

No doubt, these mixed emotions say more about me than the people I’m speaking to. Given my natural inclinations, participating in Occupy Wall Street has never been exactly effortless, as much as I’ve been drawn to it. I’ve had to work, every step of the way, to stay engaged. In the past I’ve always felt removed and a bit ridiculous whenever I’ve attended protests, whether they were anti-war marches, reproductive rights rallies, or labor pickets. No matter how much I support the cause, my natural instinct is to stand back and observe, to pass judgment on the crowd, and resent the person instructing me to chant. Joining does not come easy for me. I made a choice on September 17th last year to overcome feelings of foolishness and futility in order to be part of what was going on. I have had to make the same conscious decision every day since.

That doesn’t mean I’ve repressed my critical faculties where Occupy in concerned: I still disagree with many movement shibboleths, from the unwavering faith in consensus to the general antagonism towards the state (I’m not an anarchist). I’m unconvinced that open, amorphous, demandless organizing is the way to go and I would not cry if I never got to “twinkle” my fingers again. But my criticisms are rooted in hours of meetings and phone calls and endless email chains—and, ultimately, in astonished admiration that people all over the country have given up so much of themselves, of their finite time and energy, to such a thankless project.

In my experience, those who criticize Occupy most vociferously from the sideline are ostensibly sympathetic. In conversation, in print, or on their Facebook walls they chastise the movement for a million reasons, but above all for being too utopian. They dismiss that on direct democracy and the anarchist desire to build a better society in the here and now. And they are full of advice: Don’t we know our analysis and message and appeal to the middleclass and cib moves from the Tea Party? More and more, I’ve been convinced these critics are the real romantics, waiting for the utopia of a perfect movement, free of its flaws, immutable in its analysis, and guaranteed of success, to sweep them off their feet. In contrast, people who take the leap into Occupy are the realists; anarchists, despite their reputation to the contrary, tend to be pragmatic. They take an honest look at what actually exists around them and make the most of it, accepting the fact that people are complicated, that the way to achieve profound political change is not clear, but that we must move forward nonetheless, adapting our thinking and our strategy along the way. It would be wonderful to be united around a single message, to reach the middle class, and be promised success in overturning Citizens United or eliminating joblessness, but the left is so battered and broken at the moment that you may as well be waiting for the Republicans to disavow electoral politics or the arctic ice to spontaneously refreeze. Better to begin where we are than not begin at all.

+++ Since last September I’ve traveled extensively for work, seeking out people involved in this global wave of unrest at every destination. Somehow, time after time, I arrived right when the initial wave of enthusiasm had died down, at the moment when...
organizers were struggling to figure out how to proceed. I landed in Dublin the morning the city's encampment was cleared to make way for the St. Patrick's Day Parade. A dozen exhausted kids told me that they had been woken up in the middle of the night by hundreds of well-armed riot police. In Barcelona I followed a group of forty activists as they threw a party in a bank to celebrate a member closing her account. While the event was ebullient (and the tellers utterly befuddled) they spoke nostalgically of the days when the plazas were overflowing, even while acknowledging that such a massive show of popular discontent had failed to stop the bailouts of the financial sector. They needed a new approach (on September 25 there is a call to surround the Spanish congress and stay until the government resigns). In Montreal I met with organizers of CLASSE, the radical student union, during the summer lull, right before the provincial election that would both derail the historic strike but also, arguably, be its salient victory.

This is what movements do, I have learned. They ebb and flow. There are sethacks and there are victories. They carry on and take new shapes. They can morph into something else entirely or disappear altogether. One year later, Occupy is evolving, much like its international counterparts. In many respects, the movement is doing better work at a grassroots level than it was a year ago, from fighting foreclosures, to organizing students, to railing against Wall Street’s profiteering off municipal debt. Yet most people have no idea, since the organizers driving these efforts are more concerned with making a local impact than creating a media sensation. Looking forward, there is plenty of talk about building a durable political culture, thinking long term, and moving beyond a dependence on spontaneity and tactics (for example, the tactic of occupation) to devise a strategy of social transformation and develop organizations to support it. From plans to build a nationwide network of student unions to the Strike Debt’s long-term ambition to organize creditor-specific debt resisters’ associations, people who have been involved with Occupy are looking for new ways to institutionalize and build power without abandoning the core values of direct democratic participation and horizontal organizing that initially inspired them.

Inevitably many people will declare Occupy Wall Street a failure as the anniversary comes and goes. But if the movement has failed to meet some people’s expectations it is only because their expectations were unrealistic. What can we reasonably expect, in only a year’s time, from a movement that emerged from nowhere, out of a handful of small weekend planning sessions attended by people with little organizing experience and no institutional support? The spark Occupy lit—which established progressive organizations had been desperately trying to kindle since the economic crisis first hit—moved untold thousands of people to political action, convincing them to take that first difficult step out of apathy. Today, there is more political momentum—more grassroots energy and engagement—than there was before the protests burst on the scene last fall. Something is infinitely more than nothing, and for that we should all be infinitely grateful to Occupy.

**BRE LEMBITZ**

**DAY 12**

Bre Lembitz, a college student and economics major, was drawn into the protests at Zuccotti Park at the beginning. She played important roles in the New York working groups and encampment. This document was written on Day 12 of the occupation, September 29, 2011, to record the mood and schedule in the camp.

One of the medics told us that he has never been more confused than waking up in the middle of a park to topless women telling him to get ready to march. Each morning, we protestors roll out from under rain soaked tarps and blink dazedly at the sky. We look around, smiling at each other and at the intensity of the bed head that develops from the combination of New York City humidity, sleeping on concrete, and fewer showers than some might consider hygienic.

Some of us have been here for over a week, watching the camp move on from what someone called a “largely poorly organized, homogeneous and ineffectual” movement, to an organized movement for justice.

After the arrests on Saturday, people and supplies began pouring in. The medical station got so much attention that the team has spent a majority of their time organizing supplies. They plan to send the love on to the sixty-six other occupations across the US.

I watched a woman’s eyes fill with tears as she explained that this is the single greatest show of humanity she has ever seen. She has been working as a therapist for the group, helping individual people deal with the experience of being arrested and maced. Her sentiments are echoed throughout the camp. “You just have to stay here one day to have your faith in humanity restored.”

After twelve days of organizing, daily life consists of waking up and rolling up the bed rolls; drying anything that gets wet, and reporting to the various working groups in the camp. Red crosses identify the medic team, grey's identify the comfort team with their arms, and legal wear hats. There are over fifteen working groups, each addressing a different concern, and the camp runs around the clock, the medical team always has someone on shifts to fix the economy, drum circles and sign painting ensue.

Around lunch time, the population of New York seems to filter into the square. The number of food stalls that are now parked around the plaza illuminates the fact that the plaza has become a destination. Video cameras, still cameras, and sound recorders have become so common now that some protestors liken lunch time existence to being in a zoo.

At the closing bell of the stock market, the protestors rally to march again. There is an understanding that marching may lead to arrest, so anyone who can’t be arrested stays behind. The march returns to dinner

and the General Assembly. Tonight’s Assembly was bigger than before because Michael Moore came to film a half hour piece on the movement. Russell Simmons marched with the protestors, and Amy Goodman’s Democracy Now! team was here, too.

Night falls and protestors head toward bedrolls or their homes. Tonight, close to three hundred people are sleeping outside in the park. It has gotten to the point where the medical team had to map out a path so they can get out of their station and respond if a crisis hits. Not everyone is asleep. The bloodstream runs around the clock, the medical team always has someone on call, and though the kitchen is shut down, non-official food—pizza donations—come in throughout the night, from phone-callers around the country.

Hope, determination, and the feelings of struggle take their turns on the countenances of the protestors. They recognize that coming to a consensus on our list of demands is going to be a struggle, but it’s something we’re all willing to fight for. In the meantime, art-making, culture, and grassroots heartfelt discussions abound. We’re going to stand strong until all people can be treated with justice.

**MICHAEI SANDMEI ALD AND MOLLY OSBERG**

*Interview with Kira Moyer-Simms*

The following is excerpted from interview sessions beginning in January, 2012. Kira Moyer-Simms, 19, came to Wall Street from Portland, Oregon, for the first day of the Occupation, intending to camp for the night. A year later she is still in New York.

I grew up in a poor neighborhood in L.A. and a lot of families didn’t want me to be friends with their children because my parents were gay. I realized at a young age that this was oppression. I started organizing around my school. I built up what became the Portland public school district Gay-Straight Alliance; this grew into a statewide network, and it’s still going.

After I graduated high school I got really depressed that I couldn’t afford college and didn’t know how to go about going because I went to this hippie school. I never learned how to apply for scholarships or grants. I would have really liked to have gone to college, and still would. I ended up falling into this trap that a lot of people fall into: going to work and paying rent, going to work, paying rent. I was the kitchen manager at the Chipotle on the Portland State Campus seeing people getting to have this life that I thought I couldn’t have and it was really frustrating.

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On May Day they needed someone to help out in the Comms room. And that was something I’d done a million times. I had been trained on it. That’s weird language, but that’s what it was. I knew that it would be intense, but didn’t realize it would be as intense as it was, for sure. I was doing the social media stuff, but I was hearing every bit of communication that was coming in from every organization involved in May Day. My job was to listen to all of it and spew it out on the social media channels. So I had four or five accounts that I was supposed to be handling.

There were about ten of us. Two people were working on tracking police movements. One person right next to me was on two different conference calls with two different swarms of people on bikes, who were going around checking on everyone the whole time. One person was constantly on the phone with journalists, which I had to take a couple times too, ’cause there were just so many, you know. And then there were two different people there who were, like, bringing us coffee, asking us if we wanted anything to eat. It went by so fast. It always does. The arrests on the Brooklyn Bridge were the first time I’d ever done anything like that. It just kind of occurred naturally. A friend and I said, “Yes, we’ll stay back here for safety reasons, we’ll watch your shit.” And then it was like, wait, hold on, we need to be watching every camera. And the two of us were there, watching everyone’s computers, and realizing they all needed to be open. We had all the Livestreams on a few different laptops that we had propped open so we could see the whole thing at once, and we had the Lawyer’s Guild on the phone the whole time.

Which was kind of what Comms meant back then: we weren’t so much in communication with each other as in communication with the lawyers. We’d just watch for people getting arrested, and people would text us. Our phones were going off the hook. We had no idea 700 people would be arrested, but we ended up calling in at least 550 of those people, and getting them lawyers right away. It was fucking crazy.

Comms kind of evolved out of a jail support system. And then we realized that we don’t just need to be communicating with lawyers, we need to be communicating with each other, too. It started occurring to people, like, ‘Wait! What if we actually had a system of communication between the front and the back of the march?’ And then people started doing this thing where the pacers of the march were all on a text loop together, which was extremely complicated. And then it started to make sense for the whole thing to go through other people instead.
While we occupied the block, OSP organizer Maritza Arrastia and others acted as translators for the crowd and informed supporters about the rent strikers’ history. I went home feeling enthusiastic around eleven that night, but awoke to horrible news. Francisca Ixtiálico, a 65-year-old rent-striking tenant and activist from Mexico, was attacked that morning by Israel Espinoza, the super, and was in the hospital with brain hemorrhaging. She was attempting to show people the trash-infested basement when Espinoza allegedly slammed her against a concrete wall, and then elbowed and punched her in the face. Dennis Flores, another co-founder of OSP and a seasoned Cop Watch activist, shocked by the super’s violence toward an elderly disabled woman, pulled Espinoza off of Francisca. Both were arrested and charged with assault. Francisca was rushed to the hospital. Dennis was let go on bail the following morning. To everyone’s horror, Espinoza was back in the building and Francisca remained in the hospital for a week recovering from her injuries. The tenants and women were furious.

About a month later, on August 20, a large group rallied outside the courthouse in support of Dennis for his court date. I had no idea that Espinoza would also be in court that day. We had decided to wear red for unity. People carried “Justice for Dennis Flores” signs and news reporters joined us there. Dennis’s case ended up being postponed due to paperwork issues, but the real victory was that Espinoza was ordered to vacate the premises of 553 46th Street under police supervision and was served with two orders of protection; his case would be transferred to criminal court in downtown Brooklyn. Everyone in the courtroom was elated. We cheered while being hushed by police.

Most of us returned to the apartments on 46th Street, thrilled that Espinoza was forced to leave the building and could no longer threaten the tenants. Sara, Sue and many of the rent strikers played drums and were joined by neighbors and local musicians. Espinoza arrived around 2:00 PM accompanied by the NYPD and shamefully ducked his head away from our cameras. After the cops drove away with him, the rent-striking women let out cheers and started singing and dancing in the street. Diego, Pablo Benson and I figured out how to hang an enormous white “Rent Strike, Huelga de Renta” banner with large, colorful letters that had been cut down by the super and NYPD weeks before. The building became completely decked out with celebratory signs, and photographs.

This was a much-needed victory for the rent strikers. Now, the focus is more long-term as the tenants hope to eventually own their buildings. Expensive repairs need to be made and clearing the basement and fixing the electricity are the most pressing matters. OSP is working with activists from Take Back the Land, O4O (Organizing for Occupation), and other housing specialists who have the tenants’ best interests at heart. We hold vigils bi-weekly at the tenants’ apartments on Wednesday and Sunday evenings. We are all working together to help them with their goal of home ownership.

Like my friends Diego Ibañez and David Galarza, one of the founders of Occupy Sunset Park (OSP), the conversations outside the tenants’ apartments were intense. Mostly speaking Spanish, people were rapidly discussing next steps. David explained the situation to me: fifty-one families from three buildings on 46th Street were on a rent strike against their negligent slumlord, Orazio Petito, until repairs were made. The tenants’ basement was overflowing with garbage that had not been picked up in months. Roaches, bed bugs, rodents, mold and rotting trash were infuriating everyone in the summer heat. More dangerous was the unsafe wiring that caused numerous blackouts per day, rendering fans and air conditioners useless in the high temperatures. Tenants were irate and afraid of fires. I met Sara Lopez, the main tenant organizer, and Sue Trelles, another organizer and rent striker, both feisty and determined. They were frustrated that their numerous complaints regarding safety and repairs had been ignored. Petito, the landlord, was notoriously negligent. He had made Bill de Blasio’s “Top 50 Worst Landlords in NYC” list and was in foreclosure on numerous properties he owned and involved in several law suits. His superintendent, Israel Espinoza, had harassed rent-striking tenants with fake eviction notices, and threatened to call immigration agencies with bogus threats of deportation. A flier I was given read, “We Need Justice and We Need It NOW! When these buildings catch fire, Orazio, you will be held responsible! We Need Emergency Repairs Done NOW!”

About twenty of us walked over to Assemblyman Felix Ortiz’s office on 55th Street, chanting in English and Spanish for better living conditions. Local news crews followed. There was palpable tension upon reaching Ortiz’s office. About a week earlier the tenants had occupied his office. Now they demanded to meet with him in person. After much runaround, Ortiz came to face the tenants and invited them in for a meeting. There, one of his assistants actually said that there weren’t enough building violations for city agencies to intervene! My friends Diego Ibañez and David Galarza, one of the founders of Occupy Sunset Park (OSP). The building became completely decked out with celebratory signs, and photographs.

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Visit with Mark Adams
Thursday June 26th

On June 18th, seven Occupy Wall Street protestors were convicted of misdemeanor trespassing on an empty lot owned by Trinity Wall Street, an Episcopal church and one of the largest properties in downtown Manhattan. Seven of the activists—including a retired Bishop, George Packer—received four days of community service as punishment for their actions during the attempted reoccupation of the privately owned public space in December.

The eighth defendant, however, an affable occupier named Mark Adams with no prior criminal record, had been captured on video with bolt cutters near the empty property. He was sentenced to 45 days on Rikers Island by Judge Matthew Sciarrino on charges of attempted criminal mischief and possession of burglary tools, a significantly harsher punishment than previously recommended by the district attorney. Members of Adam’s defense team have speculated that Judge Sciarrino intended to make an example out of the activist. His jail sentence represented one of the first criminal convictions in a season of occupy-related trials.

The following is excerpted from a report back to the affinity group written to an advocate for Adams during and after his incarceration. Though Adams left his home in Maryland to organize with Occupy Wall Street in New York, he received visitors twice a week for the duration of his sentence.

We'd spent the previous twenty-four hours preparing ourselves for what we imagined would be a difficult day. We poured over the Department of Corrections website, read report backs from the last two visits, sought and received much great advice—and braced ourselves.

We arrived at Rikers via the Q100 bus from Queens Plaza, then followed other visitors toward the entrance along a path that seemed constructed to immediately make you feel trapped and uncomfortable. We stood in line for about twenty minutes between two chain-link fences with barely enough space between them for two columns of people to stand shoulder-to-shoulder. Almost every sign throughout the visit bore rules, and these rules were broken—as if we needed the reminder.

The sun beat down. In the distance, we could see large, imposing buildings surrounded by barbed wire. We wondered where Mark was. We were among maybe six white folks of about fifty total people in sight. Almost all of the other visitors were women with young children, and most seemed injured to the dehumanizing bureaucracy that frustrated us at every turn.

We left everything (including cell phones and watches) in the first locker, except some cash, our IDs, and the books we brought for Mark—(The Gift, The Wu-Tang Manual, and a book of poetry by Adam Mansbach)—and proceeded through the first security checkpoint. We waited in another line inside for about thirty minutes, and when we got to the front of the line, we were each in turn identified, asked for an address, and quizzed as to our relationship with Mark. We were a little surprised when they fingerprinted us and took mugshots, which were printed out and given to us on rectangular paper that looked and served exactly like airline boarding passes.

After another thirty-minute wait, we were pointed toward a white bus, which took us to the Eric M. Taylor Center. The short drive across the plaza reminded us we were now trapped, giving us the slightest taste of the sense of confinement that inevitably resounds for all prisoners throughout every moment of their sentence. It also allowed us a glimpse of Incarceration City—isolated buildings, each surrounded by violent tangles of barbed wire. Every inch of the place is a visual threat, its role as an institution of confinement and deempowerment constantly reinforced.

We received a brief lecture from a corrections officer before being let into the building. He mentioned that there had been “a slashing” at the building next door earlier that day and no one was being allowed in or out that day. After another security check, the backs of our left hands were stamped with a clear substance. We were bewildered by the invisible stamp; we don’t know what it was. We were told it was to mark that we had been through security, but we didn’t know how to read it and still have no idea what, if anything, it says.

Without phones or watches, and no clocks on the walls, the entire visit felt as though it took place in a time vacuum. After what must have been an hour in a room full of chairs reminiscent of a free clinic’s waiting room we were finally called to enter the “visiting floor.”

We were led to an old gymnasium, decorated with an odd collection of colorful murals of the NYC skyline—including a tragically ironic depiction of the Statue of Liberty—and plastic chairs arranged in neat rows, which were sorted by the number of seats for visitors. We were pointed to a set of three chairs across a round plastic table facing a lone seat, a setup designed to ensure our being physically separate from Mark.

We waited in anticipation for a few moments, and then suddenly there was the lovely, bearded man walking slowly across the room towards a wide smile breaking his somber face as he saw us. He looked a bit thinner (by, he later told us, about 8lbs), but bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked, and ostensibly healthy overall.

We started out conveying individual greetings and messages from a bunch of supporters who had asked us to give their regards. We told him about the solidarity actions outside Trinity Church Rector James Cooper’s house, which are ongoing down at Wall Street. We related the story of a comrade who had been turned away by corrections officers on a previous visit due to insufficient ID, and how a visit to the Department of Motor Vehicles had left said comrade so frustrated that he had three-quarters of the DMV pumping their fists in the air shouting “Fuck the system!” And we talked about the amazing community meeting that empowered the Otter Solidarity Team to set up these visits, and all the collaborative organizing throughout the community that has gone into supporting him while he’s gone. He was especially moved by this: “That might make this all worthwhile, in some way,” he said.

Mark said that he knew our visit would leave him happy for the next few hours but then he would go back to how he usually is. He told us he felt that he had left part of himself behind when he was taken to jail, explaining that “in here, this isn’t the real Mark Adams.” He spends most of his time in his bunk, reading, doesn’t go outside and tries to keep to himself. He’s received quite a bit of written correspondence—so much, in fact, that the corrections officers remarked to him that he was getting mail “like Lil Wayne did when he was in Rikers!” Some of the letters came from quite a distance, and Mark said he was particularly tickled by some children’s drawings of the D17 courtroom—a big round judge, and Mark sitting on a bench with a big beard.

He also voiced some amused bafflement at the amount of communist literature he had received: “Whoever keeps sending those books—I get it!” he told us with a grin. He stores the books in a large tupperware container under his bed. It is completely full and he is trying to figure out what to do with the surplus books. There is no library at Rikers, and if they get left around, books often wander off with the corrections officers.

Becky Wartell, Tess Cohen, and Tim Fitzgerald
We tried to run the visiting schedule by him, but Mark has enjoyed the surprise of not knowing who is coming, and trusts our judgment. "I mean, you guys know who my friends are, right?" he said with a big old Mark Adams grin on his face. And he knows who his friends are, too, and feels very loved.

We were given no warnings as to how much time had passed during the course of our visit, and seemingly out of the blue, the C.O. who had led us in handed us back our boarding passes. We looked at him quizzically, not ready to understand what that signified. "Time to go," he explained. And that was it. We watched Mark shuffle back to the door through which he came (we caught him making a goofy face at a C.O. on his way out), as we were escorted back out the door we had entered, out past security and onto the bus. For all the hours of waiting and negotiating the Rikers bureaucracy to see Mark for that sweet, sweet hour, the exit was rapid and painless. By around 5:30 we were back on the city bus and headed off of the island.

The contrast was stark, and tragic: we returned to our lives of freedom and companionship—fre to his of confinement and isolation. We de-compress, together, in a comfortable living room, while Mark—along with 14,000 other Rikers inmates, and another 7 million in federal prisons across the country— are left alone to process the injustice and dehumanization perpetuated by mass incarceration.

Jaime Omar Yassin
OAKLAND LIBRARY

Whatever happens in the coming days and weeks of the Biblioteca Popular Victor Martinez, the action has so far brought together an unprecedented union of local activism and community organizing. It has not only united communities, but flavored them with hope. The authorities began with humble expectations—filling the library with books, dropping the banner, inspiring communities to oppose austerity by taking issues into their own hands and escaping arrest—within hours they found that the action itself caught the imagination of not only the neighborhood, but a greater public audience as well. Mainstream media, normally addicted to the negative stories about occupations that occupied the story both honestly and sympathetically. A City of Oakland library administrator can dictate for the district seat even visited, giving their kudos.

Despite this widespread mainstream support, the radical politics of the action have always been front and center. That's because they are easy to understand for even the least politically sophisticated people: people have the right to control their communities, no matter what city government says; taking property left to rot through willful incompetence and/or greed and repurposing it for communal good, is an unimaginable act; cities are perhaps the worst austerity offenders, directing endless services at security measures through police, while cutting off funding for neighborhood keystone services vital to social health. Most importantly, all sanctioned attempts to end this reign of misuse have failed; it must be contested through direct action. Every response to Biblioteca from the community embodied these points.

Not surprisingly, then, the city's exaggerated police reaction—which shut down the library, threatened neighborhoods, and neighbors who came to use the library and found its entrance closed—began with humble expectations—filling the library with books, dropping the banner, inspiring communities to oppose austerity by taking issues into their own hands and escaping arrest—within hours they found that the action itself caught the imagination of not only the neighborhood, but a greater public audience as well. Mainstream media, normally addicted to the negative stories about occupations that occupied the story both honestly and sympathetically. A City of Oakland library administrator can dictate for the district seat even visited, giving their kudos.

Prompted by this sudden and cruel reality check, and the work of recreating the library that would be needed, the activists moved forward with an idea that had been floating around for some time—moving the library into the grounds behind the building along with the community garden. Biblioteca is now a self-contained and unique entity, not only on unused land and非publicly accessible, but the community’s control of the members of the community. The space weds the healthy food and knowledge base absent from communities like the "Twomps"–the experience of Biblioteca demonstrates that these are the most intensely felt aspirations in the community as residents seek to end their cycle of poverty, violence and decaying infrastructure.

The greatest challenge continues to change—to convert community members into the space, the sense of security and resources to step up fully and take over what the activists began on the inaugural day of Biblioteca Popular. Regular meetings to discuss the disposition of the library and the building have begun, and while there are varying degrees of participation in the community meetings, the spirit of political sophistication and vulnerability before the law—community members seem very excited to create a new kind of political and social zone in the Biblioteca.

None of this is easy—the odds of a successful outcome are daunting. The ups and downs of the action have been frustrating. After a brief period where police seemed to arrive at 15th street side of the building, police retreated and ran out past security and onto the bus. For all the hours of wait and negotiating the Rikers bureaucracy to see Mark for that sweet, sweet hour, the exit was rapid and painless. By around 5:30 we were back on the city bus and headed off of the island.

But such is the powerful discursive lever of this action and its target, that every police and city act seem to highlight the contradictions of city administration and attendant waste: police stood by and did nothing as three cars careened around the corner of Miller and East 15th at an alarming speed in an area where children had been playing just minutes earlier; the city called out four public works vans, one of them was there simply because the radio had malfunctioned in one of the vans and he was supposed to receive transmissions and then relay them to his co-worker in another van; the hole was "patched" with a sheet of chain link attached by easily removed hooks; workers added a metal lattice in the area where the fence meets a brick and mortar wall on the other side, which will serve as a perfect ladder for those not wish ing to jump the barely five foot tall fence in one of the many areas where, over the decades, the barbed wire has disintegrated away; and etc.

The action had a different effect than the one intended by the area’s councilperson, Ignacio de la Fuente, who most likely ordered the police response long after the OPP had seemed to limp away in an acknowledgement of their buffoonery. Several neighborhood residents who came to use the library and found its entrance closed were furious. They went to the Rikers Island first community meeting that day at 5:30pm that day that had already been scheduled. About a dozen or so parents came out with their children to talk about the next steps; not only in re-securing the space they were coming to depend on, but to re-open the building as a library and/or community center. Most of the participants were accustomed to the idea of varying levels of documentation in this country, they brought their children, some of whom participated. The meeting was bilingual and facilitation and structure also developed organically, which for me, after a seeming lifetime of frustrating inef fable meeting structures was especially gratifying. The next steps will include direct actions aimed at council members and a petition drive of neighborhood people which will
demonstrate the overwhelming support for community control of the space. Leaders with various skill-sets have quietly emerged, demonstrating that every neighborhood has an untapped series of committees waiting for activation—outreach, logistics, infrastructure. Before the week was through, one neighbor had already built a book-mobile meant to carry books to busier International Ave., and spread the news about the Biblioteca struggle.

This sudden surge of community dynamism isn’t lost on city officials, who perhaps thought they’d have an easy time of demonizing the action as an Occupy Oakland spectacle, and returning to the norm of neglect and apathy the neighborhoods of East Oakland have become accustomed to. Police officials did a slow drive-by, observing the level of community support; the next day Ignacio de La Fuente, the district’s council person, sounded much more conciliatory in his statements to Oakland North, a local online news outlet, about the space, saying that use of the space could possibly be worked out with community members. Nor is any of this lost on community members, who seem to be realizing that the key to changing conditions of their lives and communities has more to do with their own power than that of the city or its leaders; perhaps the library will only be the first step in this new movement at Miller and 15th street, and the movement a trigger to many other local movements across the country.

The Occupy LA encampment sprung up around our iconic City Hall on October 1, 2011, was initially welcomed by Mayor and City Council, and forcefully evicted by LAPD on November 30. The threatened bill to taxpayers, mainly for police overtime, hovers around $4 Million. There has been no suggestion that the public officials who asked protesters to stay might be held liable for any of these costs.

Pushed out of the core of downtown, not wanting to fold up their (figurative if not always literal) tents, some Occupiers found themselves at the “other” local Occupations, the media-invisible Occupy Skid Row encampment at Forth and Towne Streets. Occupy Skid Row was, until its summer 2012 LAPD / County Health Department eviction, the longest surviving American Occupy camp. Unlike occupations in urban centers, this one grew up in a neighborhood that was already home to thousands of poor, addicted, ill and needy citizens. In a city that has failed over decades to deal humanely and effectively with the home-less, a few more tents bedecked with idealistic slogans made no difference— at least at first.

But as the City Hall contingent got familiar with the rhythms of life on Skid Row, and spent more time with socially-conscious homeless citizens and activists, they got an education in the unique social justice challenges facing the poor and homeless when they sought to cross back over Main Street into gentrified Downtown.

Gentrification doesn’t just happen. It has to be helped along. There are a number of effective tools at the disposal of developers seeking to make their buildings more appealing to renters and businesses. But not just any tenants: they need a very specialized group of early adopters who, when properly primed, will serve as an unpaid street team, marketing the value of the community as they revel in their status as “urban pioneers.” History shows that soon after

Emilia Loftis

Oakland Library

A few weeks ago, on the morning of August 13th, a small group of organizers—many of whom met through the Occupy Oakland Commune, and others with a variety of grassroots organizing experience—opened their Facebook accounts to find a call for help in occupying, cleaning, and refurbishing a long-shuttered former library at the border of the city’s San Antonio and Fruitvale districts. Like several others in Oakland, the library had been closed in the seventies after the passage of Proposition 13. Later, radical Chicano activists founded an alternative continuation school in the building for East Oakland’s young Latinos and African Americans facing brutal oppression from police and growing violence in bohemians populate a depressed urban neighborhood, wealthy people with bohemian tastes will follow. Then it’s bye-bye bohemians. It was ever thus. Some gentrification tools are transformative: lease large ground-floor spaces to gallerists willing to take a chance in a bad neighborhood in exchange for five years of negligible rent; don’t charge pet deposits; subsidize an Art Walk; open restaurants that keep extended hours to create a community space.

Other tools are restrictive. It seems such a small step from having security guards inside locked lobbies and garages to instructing maintenance crews to hose down the sidewalks at 4am to dispatching teams of security guards to enforce the social order through intimidation and walkie-talkies that connect directly to the real police.

But that small step is the distance from private property to public space, and in the New Downtown, that’s a distinction that’s blurred and frequently abused by “The Shirts,” the color-coded security details employed by varied BID (Business Improvement District) entities that have carved up Downtown into discrete zones.

The city doesn’t clean the streets frequently enough! Don’t pester your Councilman; the BID will do it. Insufficient police presence to deter drug dealing and prostitution? Nothing a crew of beefy guys on bikes and Segways can’t handle. And why should anyone complain? BIDs are financed through commercial property tax diversion, not out of residents’ pockets, and everyone benefits from cleaner, safer streets.

The problem is that when a business lobby takes over civic services, they absorb civic power, with none of the accountability. Residents are encouraged to simply call the BID when they see something troubling on the streets, and a crew will show up and “deal with” the problem. (Conveniently, crimes reported to BID security are not recorded in LAPD crime statistics,
their communities. After that school switched locations the building passed—albeit briefly—into the hands of the halfway house across the street as a training and education center. For the last two or so decades the building, forgotten by city officials, has remained empty, becoming a decrepit eyesore, its windows covered in steel mesh and the grounds surrounded by a decaying chain-link fence.

During that time the illicit use of the building has mirrored the trajectory of the neighborhood. It attracted people struggling with substance abuse and served as a magnet for the area’s notorious undergroung sex trade. Animal and human feces and trash of all kinds filled both the grounds and the building’s interior. Though the building had a long storied reign as a bustling community center it had become a symbol of neglect and narrowed opportunities in a low-income neighborhood void of a public space for parents and children. But that Monday organizers marched in with buckets, sponges, and milk crates full of books gathered from the larger community.

Within hours the beautiful mahogany built-in bookshelves were restored and multi-paned windows had been polished. Ventilator donated activists removed feces and decades of dust and papers from the floors, taggings were buffed off the walls, and citizen-librarians began organizing a collection of around one thousand books into browsable categories.

Without much instruction from adults neighborhood children immediately took the organizers’ gardening tools that had been propped up in the backyard and began preparing garden boxes. The kids christened the first bed “The Avengers.” When I asked a boy well under the age of ten what his favorite part of the day was he answered quickly, “The garden. My parents used to have one. I want to grow food.”

The organizers called for a potluck, which begat a huge spread served on the building grounds. Mothers, grandparent children, and fathers piled chicken, vegetables, bread, and sweets onto their plates as they looked at the collection of books that would soon be a community resource. New friends making BID-protected neighborhoods appear safer than they really are.

And as landlords make decisions about which sort of people are allowed to stroll or linger, unmoledest, on public streets, a chilling effect spreads. Tired of being hassled, the poor and the undocu

mented and the weird stay away. Demo

graphics normalize. Rents go up. Yoga studios move in. It’s an urban redevelop

ment story–at least it looks that way on the surface.

Seeking a fresh focus for a move-

ment that had grown bored with the
dry crisis of banks, Occupy LA activ

ists decided to drift beneath Down-
town’s surface. What they found was

the woman behind the curtain: Carol

Schatz, President and CEO of the Cen

tral City Association and of the Down-
town Center BID. Ms. Schatz and the

powerful organizations she controls are

well-known in the business community, but obscure to the general public.

In late May 2012, a decision was

made by Occupy LA, LA CAN, Occupy

The Hood, Occupy Skid Row, Hippie

Kitchen, Los Angeles Catholic Worker and other community groups and indi

viduals to establish a protest camp on

the public sidewalk outside CCA’s head

quarters at 626 Wilshire. The intent was
to draw attention to ways in which the

CCA’s Downtown 2020: Roadmap to L.A.

Urban Future position paper seeks to

criminalize homelessness and poverty in

order to create a more business-friendly

environment.

The protest was peaceful, if occasion

ally disruptive to those doing business at

626 Wilshire. Tents were set up on the

sidewalk in the evening, and removed in

the morning as workers arrived. Occa

sional daytime protests were scheduled to coincide with large meetings of CCA member organizations. Discussion groups gathered, drums were pounded, security guards razzed and preached to, dissenting messages scrawled in chalk on the sidewalk. The peculiar orienta

tion of the building, one very short block from Wilshire, meant that during the night camps there was minimal foot traffic and no impediment to local business.

The plan was to camp out for a week— and considering that the campers got few visitors and received no media attention, the protesters would almost certainly have moved on, had they not been subject to unwarranted police harassment.

I dropped by 626 Wilshire a few

nights after the camp was formed. Per

haps a dozen people were gathered on

the sidewalk. They were a varied group:

women multi-racial. A young man and

an older woman approached me sepa

rately, and each made pleasant conversa

tion about social justice issues. They

seemed happy to have someone new to talk with. Across the street, I saw an LAPD patrol car parked with two

officers in it. Around the corner, a sec

ond black and white lurked. It seemed

an excessive response for a peaceful

gathering on a public sidewalk.

Within days, word filtered out through Occupy LA’s social media accounts that protesters were being arrested for chalk tagging.

Still, there was no press attention.

No criminal charges were filed. The arrests

continued. People felt intimidated and

angry. The “siege” was indefinitely ex

tended.

Several individuals organized a Chalk

Walk on July 12, during the monthly

Downtown Art Walk, in order to bring

the story of the arrests to a wider audi

cence. The slogan was FREE CHALK FOR

FREE SPEECH. Most participants were

members of Occupy LA, although it was

not an official OLA event.

The Thursday around 7pm, about

two dozen people gathered on Spring

Street between Fifth and Sixth Streets

handed out sticks of washable sidewalk

chalk wrapped in information about the

CCA protests and chalking arrests to Art

Walk attendees.

By 7:15pm, the protesters were sur

rounded by approximately 40 LAPD

officers, and the first chalking arrest was

made. Many people stopped and

chatted. As dusk fell, the police pres

ence grew, and more people were

arrested. At 9pm, police donned riot

helmets, and many of the protesters left for a planned fundraiser. At 9:15pm, there were so many police massed on Fifth Street that traffic was impeded and a curious crowd formed.

Around 9:30pm, the rough arrest of

a petite woman incensed the gathering
crowd, who poured down the sidewalk to the CCA section. The police responded with riot tactics, breaking up the crowd by run

ning three skirmish lines: north, south and west. At 10pm, the first less-lethal projectiles were fired. As the police

moved south into the commercial heart

of the Historic Core, they began closing
galleries, restaurants and residential

buildings and not permitting anyone to

enter or exit.

By the night’s end, at least three Art

Walk attendees would suffer beanbag

wounds to their torsos, and one to his

head. 17 people would be arrested, two

police officers would suffer minor inju

ries, thousands of people would be ter

rorized, and numerous artists, vendors,
galleries, restaurants, bars and food

trucks would suffer financial harm.

A troubling toll, and yet it’s hard to see the event as a failure, since the goal of raising consciousness was achieved. On Wednesday night, the CCA was a main stage. By Friday morning, it was the centerpiece of a dozen newspaper

articles, some nationally syndicated.

Complex issues like the dark side of
gentrification, private security in public

spaces, and the criminalization of

poverty got a rare airing. And suddenly, Occup

y LA was as relevant as it had ever been.

As the August 9 Art Walk

approached, tensions were high over what role chalk protests and Occupy

might play. My husband Richard Schave

and I, as the people who had run and put the Art Walk into a non-profit in 2009, were to be forced out due to sabotage by the local BID director, were approached by a member of Occupy LA who was concerned about the potential for further violence. We reached out to the Mayor’s Office and to the Art Walk Task Force seeking dialog, and helped orga

nize a Town Hall meeting, where activ

ists, artists, vendors, business people, and residents shared their concerns, frustrations and hopes for peace.

Days passed. Some worried because

of the arrests, others because of the

violent acts. The “siege” was indefinitely extended, and I, as the people who had run and put the Art Walk into a non-profit in 2009, was concerned for restraining themselves on a battleground that wasn’t really a battle

ground, just a square block in the heart

of the city, where after much tension and blessed release, we saw what was pos

sible when fun overruled fear, and art

trumped enforcement.

And on an urban stage where the actors can appear to be placed in the pose of scrappy street fighters vs. armored warriors, with reporters in helicopters screaming “Occupy Riot at Art Walk!” to footage showing no such thing, the fact is that Occupy can still theatricalize, and actors can appear to be placed in the pose of scrappy street fighters vs. armored warriors, with reporters in helicopters screaming “Occupy Riot at Art Walk!” to footage showing no such thing, the fact is that Occupy can still theatricalize, and actors can appear to be placed in the pose of scrappy street fighters vs. armored warriors, with reporters in helicopters screaming “Occupy Riot at Art Walk!” to footage showing no such thing, the fact is that Occupy can still theatricalize, and actors can appear to be placed in the pose of scrappy street fighters vs. armored warriors, with reporters in helicopters screaming “Occup...
talked excitedly about what classes could be offered in the free school they were planning. A software developer stopped by and promised to return the next day with a laptop and a lesson plan for an elementary computer class.

The day ended with organizers and neighbors gathered on candlelit library steps for a spoken word open mic under a big banner that declared “The Victor Martinez Biblioteca Popular” open. The library name is a hopeful memorial to a Bay Area author whose death is associated with a childhood spent working in pesticide-laden fields. A local people’s historian gave a rundown of the block history and important points of Oakland’s Chicano movement, a story often overshadowed by, though deeply intertwined with, Black Panther history. Rappers waxed radical with rhymes of liberation and militant determination, a woman graced the sidewalk with a silent dance, and a veteran of the Oscar Grant Plaza vigil delivered a narrative about his encounters with the Oakland Police Department. A few organizers stayed to keep watch over the library while others wandered back home. Some, who’d been up since the wee hours, took a break, and others left for a night’s sleep, overwhelmed and hopeful.

Just hours later dozens of police officers rolled onto the property giving the few organizers remaining little time to save some of the books before they boarded up the brand new library and padlocked the barbed wire fence. Once again, Oakland, like so many cities across the country, deemed a community-supported campaign of mutual aid to be unlawful.

But organizers wasted no time. The next morning, they hung the banner on the barbed wire fence and began setting up the library around the edge of the sidewalk. The children hopped the fence and reclaimed their garden tools so they could dig up a garden—deemed “Avengers II”—outside the fence. Children and adults chalked messages such as “No educacion sin liberacion,” “Xicano Power,” and “It’s not fair” on the sidewalk. A group of children marched to the evening potluck with signs for the police that read, “Please don’t take our library.” The gathering drew angry mothers full of support and encouragement for the activists to stand their ground.

As more and more community support became evident, and promised to return the next day with a laptop and a lesson plan for an elementary computer class.

As the community coalesced around the action activists who feared that police would seize and dump the library if it was left unattended overnight kept a 24/7 guard over the stacks. As a happy side effect, the country’s only 24/7 outdoor library received great amounts of support from neighbors who brought coffee, snacks, and meals to the activists at all hours of the day and night. The action would shift often over the next few weeks. As the core crew became worn out from round-the-clock watch they began to cautiously test the possibility of leaving the library alone overnight. Meetings became more regular with mothers steering the conversation and English being translated to Spanish or Spanish to English. Childcare and homemade treats became staples of the meetings and direct action that balanced neighbors’ security issues with their desire for militant steps forward were hammered out on the lawn chairs and broken bench stationed next to the bed of kale, broccoli, and strawberries.

At the first weekly meeting a decision was reached that activists would walk through the hole cut into the fence and work on the yard and in-the-fence gardens for just 45 minutes. At the same time, the neighbors—including the children—would garden outside the fence. After 45 minutes, the activists would exit the property. All this would be done with a sort of natural air of unapologetic focus.

Last week, the police made a scene of covering the fence’s hole. But the defiant community has expanded its on-the-grounds work, moving the books and chairs inside the yard where the gate can be secured with activists’ own padlock. A mobile bookshelf has been fashioned so that the library can bring the books to busy neighbors, the gardening has flourished, and free ESL and computer literacy classes have begun.

How far the city will allow the action to go before pushing back is yet to be seen. But the injection of hope in a community built on a deep history of radical self-empowerment cannot be arrested. As one mother said to another while chanting on the nearby sidewalk, “We don’t need the government. They do nothing for us. We just need each other.”
A lot has happened in the Quebec student movement since the May 22 demonstrations marked the largest display of civil disobedience in Canada’s history. The hundredth day of unlimited general strike brought together 500,000 people in the streets of Montreal, joining the tens of thousands of students striking since February who have been the linchpin of the growing movement. Since then, there have been over 100 more nights of marches in defiance of the “emergency law,” aimed at extinguishing the threat of the student mobilizations, that essentially made protest illegal (a bill that backfired by dramatically curtailing civil liberties, making the student strike an issue that affected every citizen). Every evening at 8PM, people would rush from their kitchens to the streets armed with pots and pans, to assemble roving orchestras, clanging collectively their refusal of the new law. These “caissons” marches, as well as countless neighborhood assemblies and the monthly solidarity marches that have routinely drawn over 100,000 demonstrators, set the tempo for the Maple Spring’s transition into summer. Despite repression, the movement clearly had the initiative, gaining more as it blossomed across society in the spring and summer months. The festival of red squares all across Montreal was a ready reminder of the scale and intensity of the ongoing student strike turned social rebellion.

In response, the Jean Charest government called for a snap election for September, a ploy to resolve the political crisis caused by the strike. Flyers calling for politicians (playfully labeled bourgeois federalists, bourgeois souverainitists, and bureaucrats) to engage in solidarite suicide (“suicidal solidarity”) with the movement, dropping on demo routes alongside hanging effigies of Quebec Liberal Party members during the July 22 protest, belied the sense that the specter of elections might provoke an impasse for the movement. In fact, CLASSE (the militant student association Coalition large de l’Association pour une Solidarite Syndicale Etudiante, which has been leading the strike) spent a month in assemblies and forums across much of Quebec, meeting with students to discuss prospects of deepening the strike initiative come August, when classes from the semester that was “suspended” last May would resume.

Nevertheless, on August 13, students from Quebec CEGEPs (pre-university/vocational colleges) voted in general assemblies not to continue the strike, opting to wait until the results of the upcoming election clarified the terrain of organizing and repression. While two CEGEPs did vote to remain on strike, for the rest, the decision was overwhelmingly in favor of a return to class. At some schools, the ratio in favor was high as twenty-one to one.

For a student strike enjoying the upswing of a popular rebellion, what would it mean to fire the government (either to the streets but in the ballot box)? The choice seemed to suspend the joyous optimism and sense of possibility that had spread far beyond the movement. Reflecting on the fragility of these moments, Cindy Milstein, a U.S.-based anarchist reporting from Montreal this summer, wrote:

"There are moments, I’m discovering more than ever, of profound crossroads in social movements, when momentum swings in one direction or the other, and moreover, when it’s important for people to stand up in solidarity with those who feel scared or pressured to back down. How people view what’s happening at such a critical juncture matters in terms of sustaining a social movement. ("Fragility & Heartbreak, Montreal, Night 110")"

To be sure, the elections were a critical juncture for the movement, a testing ground for all that they had achieved in the previous months. In the end, Jean Charest’s government fell. (A man who had seemed impervious to criticism, despite social upheaval and recent corruption charges, Charest was up until realizing he had lost power.) The election went to the separatist Parti Québécois (PQ), a party with ties to some student unions that ran on a platform of Quebec nationalism. Leader Pauline Marois promised a tuition freeze—in other words, to maintain the status quo—until an education summit was called. She also vowed to repeal “emergency law” Bill 78. It is entirely expected that the PQ’s vision for education will be a tenuous recovery of neoliberal status quo, so the question currently facing the movement is a compositional one: which sectors of the movement will be best organized amidst the cynicism and passivity that typically follows elections? As Charest’s government moves out, it is not clear how the student movement will respond. Will they go into an electoral lull to prepare for an election in five or six years, or will the strike remain the popular tool it has been in previous months. The PQ victory offers a temporary reprieve, making this a staccato victory in a social struggle aiming for more profound social change. If students continue to mobilize in the weeks and months ahead—if they can refuse the coming compromises, blackmails, and deals—we may very well witness another upswing in the revolutionary potential of their movement. On the other hand, if the PQ and corporatist student unions continue to recuperate the movement, its transformative potential may very well be diverted.

At the root of this struggle are two very different conceptions of politics and power. To get a sense of the differences between these camps, it is worth sharing at length the words of the recent CLASSE manifesto “Nous sommes aventurier,” which draw a clear line between the politics of social movements and the politics on display in the recent bout of electoral pageantry:

The way we see it, direct democracy should be experienced, every moment of every day. Our own voices ought to be heard in assemblies in schools, at work, in our neighborhoods. Our view is that truly democratic decisions arise from a shared space, where men and women are valued. As equals, in these spaces, women and men can work together to build a society that is dedicated to the public good. We now know that equal access to public services is vital to the community. We wonder how we will succeed in creating a society where decision-making and the ways in which we organize our lives with one another are shared. This is the heart of our vision.

Democracy, as viewed by the other side, is tagged as “representative”—and we wonder just how the students of democracy organize up for air? To what extent—the answer: emergency laws, with riot sticks, pepper spray, tear gas. When the elite feels threatened, no principle is sacred, not even those principles that they hold: for them, democracy works only when we, the people, keep our mouths shut.

In choosing to strike, we have chosen to fight for these ideas. We have chosen to create a power relationship, the only mechanism that will allow us to tip the scales. Sharing this responsibility together, we can accomplish a great deal. But in order to do this we have to speak their language. The history has shown us eloquently that if we do choose, hope, solidarity, and equality, we must not beg for them: we must take them. This is what we mean by combative syndicalism.

While Quebec is, in many ways, an exceptional case, the issues that galvanized the student movement are the same ones that inspired Occupy Wall Street. In Quebec, students have revolted against the rising price and privatization of education, as well as health care and a number of other public goods. As a symbol of debt resistance, the red square that we mean by combative syndicalism.

...
money and wages in social reproduction in its broadest terms. For decades, this has been the uneven and international terrain ofenclosures and privatizations in a wide arena of social life, and therefore has also been a terrain of many diverse openings and reclama-
tions. Through debt, we also see that what links the Maple Spring, Occupy, and many points in between is a movement for the commons that is redefining "public," as well as our idea of who controls it.

It is clear that if Occupy can continue to learn from the experience of the Quebec stu-
dent strike, continue to remain steadfast and focused despite the distortions and seduc-
tions of the upcoming U.S. elections, we too may be able to bring our movement to a new moment of organizational power. Much still rests in the balance, but we can resolve in the fact that a victory anywhere that refuses the exclusions and divisions of austerity and debt is a victory everywhere in this global struggle.

I want to thank Morgan Buck, Cindy Milstein, and Lilian Radovas for the insights, research, and editorial suggestions they contributed to this article. Firsthand accounts and analysis from the Quebec student strike can be found in a forthcoming dossier collect-
ively edited and published by Common Notions (see www.commonnotions.org for more information).

ERIK BUHN

OCCUPY GERMANY

Translated by Anne Schult

[Erk Bu hn is an organizer involved with Occupy Frankurt and the Blockupy action at the European Central Bank this past spring. He recently has been traveling across Germany, as the movement there continues to link its encampments and activists and imagine solutions. -Ed.]

“What do they want? We’re doing fine here, after all.”

That sentiment epitomizes the obstacles that our Occupy movement here in Germany needs to overcome. The problem isn’t a lack of visible issues: as the euro crisis gets worse, and more and more scandals come to light within the financial sector here, you can find broad agreement here about the origins of the crisis, in conversations with passers-by and even in the remarks of leading politicians. Even when possible solutions are brought up, opinions don’t differ that much between the different people who speak of the crisis abstractly. But as soon as the solutions start to seem concrete — as soon as anyone begins to break free from the daily routine, and questions our old patterns of behavior — nobody feels responsible anymore for changing things. After all, Germany has a public healthcare system (though it’s reduced every year in order for the state to become more “economical”). Germany has a social safety net which also provides backup income for the unemployed (but with which the unemployed are stigmatized and pushed off to the margins of society). Germany is wealthier than ever (but that wealth is only growing for those who are already wealthy, near the top, while all other ranks of society sink toward relative poverty). Why change anything? Things are really fine here in Germany.

The camps as blemish on the face of Germany

Occupy started to appear in the media first because of the protests in the U.S., and then the springing-up of camps movement of the Squares didn’t just lead to a rupture in the politics of the larger society, but also a rupture inside the Left. Many leftist political forces abstained from this mass rebellion. The anarchist movement split over whether to participate in the Squares Movement, with many arguing it wasn’t radical enough to warrant their participation. Dogmatic sections of the Left even protested against the Square, because it wasn’t a movement that fit inside their preexisting schema. A young Greek radical described it to me as follows:

"After all these struggles, the people went to the Squares, our ‘Occupy move-
ment.’ KKE and ANTARSYA [two old, devout leftist political movements] would say, ‘You must be active.’ But when there was a major upsurge of the people, they refused to join. Yet for all of their constant activism, they produce no actual new movement or consciousness or changes in society. But the Squares movement brought profound changes in society.”

Meanwhile, participants in SYRIZA, the Coalition of the Radical Left, stood out in making major contributions to the Movement of the Squares. One organi-
zation, the Communist Organization of Greece (KOE), a member of SYRIZA,
here as well. In the beginning, the protests in Germany were met with widespread acceptance among the population. The fact that somebody actually had stepped out onto the street to speak up against financial dictatorship resonated with many people’s grievances. But when success didn’t come quickly enough, when the protesters were not able to single-handedly change the banking system, and the losers of the free-market economy—the homeless, the desperate—began to gather in the camps, antipathy towards the protests increased. Instead of thinking about the sources of homelessness and poverty, people put up the camps at the origin of the problem. And so the media changed its coverage as well: suddenly, they reported on Occupy’s rat infestations (!), on illegal Romanians, on dirt and medical epidemics. As a participant in the Occupy camp in front of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, I can unequivocally state that the situation in the camp was never any cause for a medical or sanitation authority to intervene. But the camps did demonstrate quite plainly the negative consequences of our lifestyles and our greed for gain. The losers of economic competition were plainly on display: central public spaces, violators of the unwritten law of hiding outsiders in dark corners. That’s why the Occupy camp in Düsseldorf was evicted on August 1, the camp in Frankfurt evicted on August 6, and the camp in Kiel is threatened by eviction right now. Nothing else has changed but the need to save face and say, “There’s nothing to see here.”

**Occupy without camps**

Most Germans anticipate that when the last tent vanishes, the protesters will too. But we Occupy activists have built up a nationwide and international network over the past year, and new groups and initiatives have been born that will distribute the concepts of Occupy throughout our population in different ways. What is more, the occupation was only an expression, never the purpose of the protests. It served to initiate public debate. If one intends to get lasting developments underway, one has to be consistent, and reach the social mainstream. Germany has yet to feel the consequences of the successive financial crisis, euro crisis, and debt crises, but it certainly will in upcoming years. In the meantime, Occupy will continue to spread its fundamental message, and try to have this at least heard by the mainstream: Be brave, be democratic, and don’t let yourself be deprived of your rights. Then we can have some hope that everything really will be fine, in Germany and throughout the world.

contributed to the development of the movement by creating key initiatives that resolved challenges the movement faced. When doctors lost their jobs because of austerity measures, the KOE played a role together with others in organizing doctors to treat people for free in the Squares occupations. The Squares became a place where migrant workers could come to be treated, when the racist trioka government denied them health-care. When the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn came to distribute Greek flags in the cities, aiming to align ultra-nationalism with the Greek Squares movement, the KOE came with the flags of other countries where people are struggling against oppression, including Egypt, Russia, and Palestine. From the very beginning of the Squares occupations, the KOE incorporated the image of a helicopter and the slogan “GET OUT!” – making it clear that all they want is to support their government leaders with the camps, not to get in helicopters and flee into exile. The helicopter image has come to characterize a radical pole of the Squares movement. As a result of all this, much of the Squares Movement has transformed the landscape of the Left itself. Those political forces which were once small electoral coalitions, such as SYRIZA in particular, have become major channels of resistance, political energy, and engagement for millions. SYRIZA had its roots as a coalition in the anti-globalization movement in Greece, before becoming an electoral bloc. In other words, SYRIZA itself represents a diverse set of radical currents and alliances with inevitable differences between them. Some forces within SYRIZA imagine a Greece liberated from foreign imperialist power and capitalist logic, and see Greece as a possible spark that spreads such liberation to the rest of Europe. They sum up their ideas with the slogan, “Another Greece in another Europe.” Other forces in SYRIZA imagine a series of reforms that make the European Union into a progressive force in the world. Today these diverse currents are united, but that is not likely to always remain the case.

For now, the whole of SYRIZA has taken a courageous stand against the memorandum and the trioka, declaring its intention to shred the memorandum, abolish the technocratic regime, renegate Greece’s position in the European Union, refuse Greece’s participation in the wars of imperialism, and ultimately expel all foreign military bases from Greece. It is a plan which has captured the imaginations and aspirations of millions of people. One third of Greece voted for SYRIZA, and it is said that even more support the party, but feared that Greece would be isolated from the outside world by the trioka, and plunged into extreme poverty if the Radical Left were to be elected.

The plans of SYRIZA contain many contradictions and assumptions. For example, it is hard to imagine a future where this kind of program would be allowed to be implemented peacefully, with Greece remaining in the euro-zone, and without some sort of showdown or confrontation. This road of radical reform was not allowed peacefully in other societies such as Chile. No doubt the different and opposing poles that exist within SYRIZA will become harder to ignore as the situation evolves.

No revolution is predetermined or guaranteed. Without a doubt, the differing ideas, practice, and methods of the far Left will pose themselves very sharply in the future. But for now, millions in Greece have spoken: they will not go quietly as their society is crushed by ruthless austerity and global technocrats. Our brothers and sisters in Greece are in the midst of an uprising that mirrors the Occupy movement in many ways, yet is at the same time ten steps ahead of it. Christos, a young student and revolutionary, said to me, “Your Occupy Wall Street movement is so important to us. We can see that this thing is even happening in America now.” If we are to transform this world, we’ll do it together.

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**Pussy Riot Closing Statement**

On August 8, the three members of Russian feminist punk band Pussy Riot delivered their closing statements at the Moscow Khamovniki District Court. Charged with “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred,” Maria Alyokhina, Yekaterina Samutsevich, and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova were first arrested on March 3, a day before the controversial re-election of Vladimir Putin. They had committed their crime on February 21, when five members of Pussy Riot staged a guerrilla performance on the altar of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. For less than a minute, the women danced, singing, “Our Lady, Chase Putin Out!” and crossing themselves until they were apprehended by security guards.

Below is Katya Samutsevich’s closing statement, translated by the Chto Delat collective in Petersburg. On August 17, the three members of Pussy Riot were sentenced to two years in a prison colony for their one-minute performance.

—Bela Shayevich

In the closing statement, the defendant is expected to repent, express regret for her deeds, or enumerate attenuating circumstances. In my case, as in the case of my colleagues in the group, this is completely unnecessary. Instead, I want to voice some thoughts about what has happened to us.

That Christ the Savior Cathedral had become a significant symbol in the political strategy of the authorities was clear to many thinking people when...
Implementing this thoroughly interesting political project has required considerable quantities of professional lighting and video equipment, air time on national television for hours-long live broadcasts, and numerous background shoots for morally and ethically edifying news stories, where the Patriarch’s well-constructed speeches would in fact be presented, thus helping the faithful make the correct political choice during a difficult time for Putin preceding the election. Moreover, the filming must be continuous; the necessary images must be burned into the memory and constantly updated; they must create the impression of something natural, constant, and compulsory.

Our sudden musical appearance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior with the song “Mother of God, Drive Putin Out!” violated the integrity of the media image that the authorities had spent such a long time generating and maintaining, and revealed its falsity. In our performance we profaned the Patriarch’s blessing, to undo the entire legacy ofOrthodox culture with that of protest culture, thus suggesting that Orthodox culture belongs not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch, and Putin, but that it could also ally itself with civic rebellion and the spirit of protest in Russia.

Perhaps the unpleasant, far-reaching effect of our media intrusion into the cathedral was a surprise to the authorities themselves. At first, they tried to present our performance as a prank pulled by heartless, militant atheists. This was a serious blunder on their part, because by then we were already known as an anti-Putin feminist punk band that carried out its media assaults on the country’s major political symbols.

In the end, considering all the irreversible political and symbolic losses caused by our innocent creativity, the authorities decided to protect the public from us and our nonconformist thinking. Thus ended our complicated punk adventure in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

I have now mixed feelings about this trial. On the one hand, we expect a guilty verdict. Compared to the judicial machine, we are nobodies, and we have lost. On the other hand, we have won. The whole world now sees that the criminal case against us has been fabricated. The system cannot conceal the repressive nature of this trial. Once again, the world sees Russia differently than the way Putin tries to present it at his daily international meetings. Clearly, none of the steps Putin promised to take toward instituting the rule of law has been taken. And his statement that this court will be objective and hand down a fair verdict is yet another deception of the entire country and the international community. That is all. Thank you.

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**Alex Foti**

**EUROPE: HOW TO BLOCK AUSTERITY?**

Götterdämmerung for the monetarist theologians and the Maastricht temple they built—this is what the crisis of the euro is predating. The edifice built by pure neoliberal theory after the Fall of the Wall is crumbling to pieces twenty years after Mitterrand and Kohl had agreed to it. The problem is that, absent countervailing capital movements, being forced to achieve German-style monetary strength brings deflation to all the EU countries that can’t compete with German industry, and this means pretty much everybody save the French, the Dutch, and the Scandinavians. Since the Great Recession started in 2007, Germany has been exporting deflation to Southern Europe. Yet the consensus among the eurocracy is that all debtor countries should cut spending and balance the accounts in order to submit to the irrational whims of financial markets (read: international banks and rating agencies).

Countries whose international funding has dried up completely, like Greece, but also increasingly Spain, are forced to beg Germany and the IMF-led troika to let them borrow euros big time; otherwise they won’t be able to pay for wages, welfare, and pensions, all of which are to be downsized drastically anyway.

Rather than demolishing the monetarist construction behind the euro (the Central Bank focuses only on price stability and countercyclical fiscal policy is abolished a priori) that is plaguing Europe in yet another round of unemployment and precarization, escalating poverty and worsening public health conditions, the European elites ask for even more socially punishing austerity while bailing out reckless banks. Austerity is obviously antidemocratic, socially scornful, and made economically defeatist, yet it is the mantra of Europe’s moderates and conservatives in power, and the like-minded technocrats they have put in government around Europe.

Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU), monetarist and fiscal hawks till they die, is even to the right of a bankers’ man like Mario Draghi, who is at least ready to buy debt to assuage the financial crisis, just as Bernanke is doing in America with Quantitative Easing. However, monetary policy alone is unable to drag an economy out of a crisis. Only public spending (i.e., expansionary fiscal policy) can. The alternative to the ECB’s temporary heterodoxy would be exploding costs of servicing national debts and ultimately the death of the euro zone and the European Union, that federalist utopia dreamt by Spinelli and Arendt and translated into practice by Monnet and Delors (a depoliticized blend of Christian and social democracy) which has kept nationalism at bay and Europe prosperous. Until half a decade ago, that is.

The alternatives for the surviving European left and for those (many more) inspired by the Indignados movement in Spain and the Occupy movement in North America are stark and clear; when it comes to Europe, everybody agrees on the rejection of austerity, to be opposed with all forces by a broad front until it is defeated and substituted by a policy of the opposite sign: monetary and fiscal expansionism, for a more ecoclastic society that empowers communities and frees individuals while addressing needs. But the rejection of austerity can also be bundled with the rejection of Europe as a political construction, which is the anti-imperialist position. In the alternative case (let’s call it the “euroradical” position) we, the movement, are really fighting for another Europe—a non-Maastricht Europe—not for the end of Europe. A place where financial markets are strongly regulated and free-market neoliberalism is finally exposed for having caused the worst crisis and the worst excesses of inequality since the Great Depression.

This tension between the pro- and anti-European segments of the left was visible in the momentous (but not tumultuous) days of protest in Frankfurt, home of Europe’s Central Bank and most important stock exchange, in May 2012. “Blockupy the ECB and the troika!”—this was the rallying call. But on the posters it said, “European movements
Debt is not personal, it is political. It makes when you strike debt, know that: debtors, and defaulters who don’t owe the banks any afford our own oppression. We are citizens, homeowners, renters, teachers, students, parents, children, debtors, and defaulters who don’t owe the banks any. The 99% are forced into debt by the debt-prison system. They are ashamed when we can’t climb our way out of debt. We have to blockupy Europe. Of course we want to do both, because the 1% knows no national boundaries (capitalists are the only true internationalists). But I’d argue that those that speak in globalist terms are really evading Europe’s most pressing political issue: how to defeat austerity and fill the democratic deficit that existing European institutions have left. Some think that the most important level of the struggle against austerity is the national one: each movement should mainly fight its national government on budget cuts, the slashing of education and health funds, etc. I think this is not only historically wrong (reviving the nation-state spells only doom and suffering for Europe), but strategically mistaken. For national governments are constrained by Germany, France, and the eurocracy. National governments have “their hands tied by Europe,” as the technocrat currently in power in Italy, Mario Monti, is fond of saying. Austerity is decided in Brussels and Frankfurt, not in Rome, Athens, or Madrid. It can only be defeated at the European level. And this requires a truly European movement that overcomes differences in national ideological traditions to fight and defeat the common adversary: Europe’s neoliberal elites. I’m a cosmopolitan and will always prefer larger, federal, transnational polities to regional and national affiliations. But this is secondary. Because if you really want to defeat austerity, you really have to blockupy Europe. And this means you must be ready to occupy the European Parliament and turn it into the voice of Europe’s 99%. Anything short would be symbolic, while returning to one’s own little motherland would be chimeric.

Debt Resistance

Strike Debt

Strike Debt Manifesto

We must transform our failed economic system that impoverishes millions while destroying the ecosystem. Using a diversity of tactics that includes a Rolling Jubilee, a People’s Bailout, and vigorous organizing towards a debt strike, Strike Debt seeks to abolish debt as it currently exists and reconstruct a just society where our debts and bonds are to one another and not the 1%. The 99% are forced into debt to pay for basic social needs like education, housing, and healthcare while the 1% profits. We can no longer afford our own oppression. We are citizens, homeowners, renters, teachers, students, parents, children, debtors, and defaulters who don’t owe the banks anything. We owe each other everything.

When you strike debt, know that:

1. You are not a loan. Debt is not personal, it is political. It makes us isolated, scared and subjugated, unwilling to publicly challenge it for fear of the all-powerful credit ratings. The system of individualized debt is immoral. It is indentured servitude, a type of bondage. We are forced onto a path of endless repayment and are supposed to be ashamed when we can’t climb our way out of debt. We have to sell our time, our souls, working jobs we don’t care about simply so we can pay interest to the bank. Now that debt is so rampant, many of us are ashamed for putting others in debt. Our professions from teacher to lawyer and physician have become means to direct more victims to the loan sharks. So perhaps above all, we strike the fear, refuse the shame, end the isolation. When we strike debt, we do so together, creating possibilities for imagining ourselves as collectivities not reducible to a set of numbers. We are not abdicating our responsibility, we are exercising our innate right to refuse the unjust.

2. We live in a debt society, buttressed and secured by the debt-prison system.

$1 trillion of student debt. 64% of all bankruptcies caused by medical debt. 5 million homes foreclosed already, another 5 million in default or foreclosure. Credit card debt is $800 billion, generating an average 16.24% interest on money banks borrow at 3.25%. Permanent indebtedness is the pre-eminent characteristic of modern American life. Keeping all this in check is the peculiarly U.S. specific apparatus, in which mass
incarceration, racialized segregation and debt servitude are mutually reinforcing. The choice is stark: debt or jail. With 2 million in prison, seven million involved in the “correctional” system in various ways and sub-prime loans and other predatory credit schemes targeted at people of color, this is a system designed to disenfranchise and exclude.

3. There’s A Debt Strike Going On.
There is something happening in our debt society right now. 27% of student loans not in deferral are in default. 10% of credit card debt has been written off as irrecoverable. Foreclosures and mortgage default are rampant. People are walking away from debt. These actions take place driven by necessity, by desperation but also by something else. What do we call this? We could call it refusal. We could also call it a debt strike.

In this time of high unemployment, battered trade unions, and job insecurity, we may not be able to signal our discontent by not going to work, but we can refuse to pay. Alongside the labor movement, a debtors movement. For those who can’t strike, we propose a Rolling Jubilee in which we buy debt in default, widely resold online for pennies on the dollar: and then abolish it.

4. When we strike debt we live a life rather than repay a loan.
We refuse to mortgage our lives. We reject the math that debt forces on us; math that says we cannot “afford” to care for our communities because we must “pay back” the banks forever, above and beyond what was borrowed. We question the dominance of the market in every aspect of social and cultural life. We abolish the trajectory of a life that begins with the assumption of debt before birth, and ends with a post-mortem settlement of accounts. This is mafia capitalism. We will construct a social world in which we treat each other as human beings, recognize our differences, and reject the myth of permanent economic growth, which is destroying the possibility of life on this planet.

5. We claim the necessity of debt abolition and reconstruction.
Abolishing debt is held to be an impossible demand. “Debt must be repaid!” Unless you are a corporation, bank, financial services company, or sovereign nation should also be abolished. Then we can begin reconstruction, transforming the circumstances that create the destructive spiral of permanent personal debt. Debt affects everyone. Right now we must borrow to secure basic goods that should be provided for all: housing, education, health care, and security in old age. Meanwhile, around the world, debt is used to justify the cutting of these very services. We understand that government debt is nothing like personal debt. The problem is not that our cities and countries are broke but that public wealth is being hoarded. We need a new social contract that puts public wealth to equitable use and enshrines the right to live based around mutual aid, not structured around lifelong personal debt.

WINTER

The Debt Resistance

Movement: A History

As the anniversary of that first night in Zuccotti Park approaches, we hear similar questions across the media sphere, echoing throughout what remains of “the left.” Is the movement dead? Is this our last hooray? Are we really anything without a physical occupation? There is no question that the coming and going of May Day caused a mini-crisis in the semi-informal network calling itself “Occupy Wall Street.” Five months of planning went into a single day, a day designed to show the force of the 99%. And make no mistake, it was a beautiful day. But afterwards? Well, it wasn’t quite clear what would come next. We hadn’t bothered to ask ourselves this question. Instead, we focused on building a coalition with labor unions, immigrant rights groups, and other community-based organizations.

And so, Occupy Wall Street emerged from May Day a little more experienced in working with others, but with no party line, no clear organizational structure, no set of demands, and no clear strategy for accomplishing our goal: a fair and just society for all.

Around this time, Montreal erupted in a massive student strike that shook the globe. For many in New York City, it came out of nowhere (although many were aware of the years of organizing and struggling going on in Montreal). Overnight, the NYC movement was re-energized. Spontaneous “Casseroles Marches” were regularly being called. The cops were unprepared; we roamed the streets of NYC for several weeks banging pots and pans and calling for free education. But still, a reboost of energy and excitement is not enough to challenge or transform a massively powerful and corrupt system overnight. The question quickly became: how can we harness this energy? This is the context in which Occupy Theory, the publishers of the free, radical magazine Tidal began calling for thematic assemblies. Dozens would sit in Manhattan’s Washington Square Park, overlooking New York University, the university’s real estate magnate boasting the country’s highest student debt profile. The assemblies were loosely facilitated; we sat on the concrete together pondering the direction of the movement, the function of different tactics and the possibilities opened up by the uprising in Montreal. We began vaguely remembering that feeling of those early days in Zuccotti: a whole world is possible; we just need to slow down, and think, and talk, together.

After a few assemblies, a theme was beginning to emerge: debt. The students in Montreal were making it perfectly clear for us. They were not against the tuition hikes per se, they were against a whole system of neoliberal policies. They were against a way of life that meant governments colluding with financial institutions to commit us all to a life in debt; a life in debt being a life without possibility, without imagination, without self-determination. A life in debt meaning the 99% doomed to indentured servitude and the 1% to a life of endless profit.

As a member of OSDC, this was all familiar to me. Intuitively, I knew this. I felt it when, in October of 2011, I joined with other activists to create a call for a proto-debt strike, asking fellow student debtors (yes, I have
over $10k in student debt), to sign a pledge. The pledge called for what would effectively be a debt strike among student debtors, whom one million of us had signed the pledge. For many reasons, about which one could write a whole new essay, we have not yet reached one million. But we have obtained thousands of signatures, which is not bad.

In OSDC we had talked about a debt coalition (e.g., with healthcare and housing groups) for months. And here it was, sitting in front of us. As we organized forces with OSDC and the thematic assemblies morphed into “Strike Debt” assemblies. Most of us identified with Occupy Wall Street, but this wasn’t just an OWS “project,” “initiative” or “campaign.” We all felt this was something else, something new: an emerging debt resistance movement.

We spent the summer reflecting on the past year and vigorously researching debt in all its forms, and everywhere we found Wall Street profiting, rigging the game: the globalization movement, the IMF and structural adjustment programs; municipal debt, municipal bond markets and broke cities cutting services; credit card debt, mortgage debt, student debt, medical debt; a credit score system based on fear and surveillance; “alternative financial services” like payday loans and prepaid cards exploiting the poor and undocumented and keeping class and race lines solidly entrenched. Teach-ins from Gayatri Spivak, David Graeber, Andrew Ross, Nick Mirzoeff, and Richard Dienst drove the point home: the whole system runs on debt; debt affects everyone (even those without debt).

Strike Debt emerged from the summer with a series of projects, initiatives, resources and frameworks promising to carry the movement forward for years. Strike Debt acted as a supplement to OSDC, adding a systematic analysis, a direct action group, a focus on mutual aid, a tech group, and a long-term strategy. As I write this, Strike Debt is putting the finishing touches on The Debt Resistors’ Operations Manual, a guide for individual and collective action mixed with an analysis of the global debt system. Strike Debt is also planning replicable direct actions, from debt burnings to local actions highlighting for-profit colleges, the unregulated and predatory nature of debt lending and collection, etc.

And this just scratches the surfaces of Strike Debt’s potential. We had heard for months that after the Savings & Loans crisis of the 1980s, a glint in the system emerged: in a secondary market, we could actually buy debt for pennies on the dollars and abolish it. In November of 2012, Strike Debt will host a “Telethon” with celebrities and luminaries helping to raise money for this purpose. This action will show the absurdity of the whole system: old debt is basically worthless and can be written off—but not by you. The bailouts of 2011-2012 showed the double standard: Wall Street doesn’t have to pay its debts, but the 99% does (no matter what). This small-scale debt abolition will be called the “Rolling Jubilee.” Strike Debt is hoping that it operates on a pay-it-forward model, inspiring fundraising in communities across the country to buy and cancel each other’s debts.

But ultimately, Strike Debt has bigger fish to fry: the hope is that it can pick off where OSDC left off, and begin to organize a massive global debt strike. And how do we accomplish this? As many intellectuals have pointed out, a debtors’ union could easily be the 21st century version of a labor union. In addition to a wage-system, a debt-system. We know this will be long, back-breaking work. OSDC has taught us that you can’t just “call” for a debt strike—there is a need to organize one. And this includes creating spaces for people to “come out” as debtors, shedding the shame of being in debt. It also must include mutual aid: a system of supporting each other outside and beyond the current system.

The foundations are being put in place, and we can now see clearly that organizing around debt has enormous potential for years to come. In the meantime OSDC will continue to push the pledge and try to organize student debtors as the student debt crisis continues to unfold. We know that we have our work cut out for us. The morality around debt (“you must pay your debt”) continues to dominate the public discourse. But we know that we are on the right side of history. If you’d like to help push these conversations forward and help build the debt resistance movement, please contact strikedebt@interoc- cupy.net and/or visit our website: strikedebt.org.

Take action. Join the resistance.
and dreams are delayed or deferred because debt reduces people’s lives to the brute calculation of the monthly chit. From there, the political ramifications are obvious. “Once indebted,” Mahmud wrote, “debtors become subjected to normalization by debt and are less likely to claim nonconformist views, or indulge in nonconformist conduct.” As a syn.onym for “guilt” and “sin,” debt is internalized social struggle. It is a collective experience of domination rendered as individual failure, often resulting in the very “apathy and non-involvement”—or at least a feeling of powerlessness in the face of inevitability—dreamed up by the Trilateral Commission.

So what can we do? How can we fight back as individual debtors and challenge debt as a system? This question represents a productive tension within Occupy and Strike Debt. A real solution must be developed over the long term: a popular campaign of debt refusal followed by a mass cancellation of debts. This strategy is not without potential dangers. Debts owed by the 1% are canceled all the time. Just ask AIG. That is why a debt Jubilee must be carefully crafted as a means to ensure democratic authority over the money and credit systems, not just as a way to promote business as usual.

By deciding, together, which debts must be honored and how credit markets based on trust and mutual aid might function, we refuse to play the role of a subservient populace envisioned by global elites.

The prospect that we may cast off our apathy and noninvolvement strikes terror into the heart of the 1%. Recently, I worked as a secretary for a billion-dollar corporation housed in a luxury Manhattan high rise. The professional staff was serviced daily by a small army of low-wage busboys, cooks, and janitors. One day, I struck up a conversation with one of these workers about office culture and about some of the tensions I saw there between the corporate bosses and everybody else.

“‘There is tension in the air because the rich guys here are afraid of….what is that Wall Street group?’ he asked.

I answered, “You mean Occupy Wall Street?”

He nodded and smiled. “The rich are afraid because they know that someday all of this,’ he gestured around us, ‘is going to end.”

Andrew Ross

Democracy and Debt

Failed democracies are typically associated with the suspension of constitutional guarantees, such as free speech, privacy, or habeas corpus. Usually, there is some shadowy foreign threat involved. Persons are held and imprisoned without specific charges, police agencies are empowered to wiretap and search at will, and the militarization of daily life sets in. Since 9/11, the US has traveled quite far down that road, with the upholding of the Patriot Act provisions, the institutional growth of “homeland security,” the overreach of the 2012 National Defense Authorization Act, and the emergence of a strenuous foreign policy of extrajudicial assassinations.

The other way of detecting a failed democracy is when a supranational body is allowed to bypass the power of an elected government in order to dictate policy, either directly or through terms that offer limited choices. This has long been the experience of debtor nations in the global South. Most recently, sovereign debt crises have placed several Eurozone nations (Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Spain) in this position, where their economic affairs are largely determined by the so-called troika— European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). But what do we call a democracy that permits its financial elites to hold the citizenry in near-servitude through usurious debt contracts? Where populations are so constrained by household debt that their optional life choices are effectively voided, and where the economic monopoly of creditors extends to tight political control over lawmakers? These were the circumstances, amounting to a profound deficit in democracy, under which Occupy was born in the Fall of 2011. In the period since the financial crash, three years earlier, the deeply asymmetric treatment doled out to debtors and creditors had become so familiar to the public mind that it could be encapsulated in the ubiquitous Occupy street slogan: “Banks got bailed out, we got sold out!” In Europe, where elites tried to pass on the costs of their sovereign debt crises to the most vulnerable populations—the young and the poor—an arguably more defiant posture was favored: “We Won’t Pay for Your Crisis.” Both of these rallying cries were shorthand for a new kind of right, born of conditions, to paraphrase Marx, that were not of anyone’s choosing. When a representative democracy converts basic social needs into a pool of rents to be collected by private profiteers, then it is legitimate to refuse debts incurred in the process. Indeed, the right to do so may be the only true, democratic option.

In the summer months of 2012, the OWS Strike Debt Assembly (www.strikedebt.org), building on work done by the Occupy Student Debt Campaign (www.occupystudentdebtcampaign.org), cohered around the theme of debt as a program for critique, direct action, and transformation of the rentier economy. Conditions of indebtedness were responsible for the making of the 99%, and striking at the right of the 1% to impose, and profit from, these conditions would be the pathway to forging alternatives. In the long term, the spirit of Occupy demands that the existing, predatory circuits of debt be converted into a system of socially productive credit.

The Visibility of Debt

People who take out loans usually don’t recognize themselves as debtors until they begin to fall behind in their payments. In other words, they don’t identify as being “in debt” as long as they are routinely servicing their loans. That’s because indebtedness became a smoothly normalized feature of advanced consumer societies in the postwar period. Loans were eagerly pursued and accepted, because debt was sold as a good consumer asset—likely, if not guaranteed, to generate returns. In an era of cheap credit, and rising
realty prices during the housing bubble, mortgage debt in particular became the passport for ordinary people to the speculator’s game of fast returns. Educa-
tion is the highest global pastime, particu-
larly in the U.S. since the mid-1980s, was still regarded as a good asset until recently, because it was a gateway to the higher rewards of employment in the knowledge economy.

None of this corresponded in any way to the experience of populations in the global South who had been caught in a debt trap for the last century. There, beholding the foreign bondholders by the enforcers at the IMF and World Bank. After 2008, this gap in the experience of debt narrowed appreciably. Citi-
izens of the global North woke up and found their debts had turned bad; their futures, as well as their houses, were facing foreclosure. Their collective experience of affluence took a hit, and, while the economic impact was ruinous, it had an upside—nothing else had really worked in persuading Northerners that the cost of maintaining their carbon-intensive way of living was widespread immunisation and environmental waste in the South.

After a brief eco-Keynesian interreg-
mum of stimulus spending, undertaken, in large part, to mask the monumental costs of bailouts palatable, the rollout of neoliberal policymaking resumed, aimed at accel-
eration of the transfer of resources from public goods to private hands. Despite the evidence that householders bore no resemblance at all to public debt, the claim that ordinary people had somehow been living beyond their means was cynically marshaled to introduce austerity measures. In the same vein, they treated their own debts as matters to be rene-
gotiated or written off at will. Only the little people are actually required to pay them off in full.

Yet the rates of default are rising like floodwaters. Median household debt has risen to $75,600. There is no large-scale fix available, it can never be paid off, and the question is given default—forgiveness can or will be administered fairly in the years to come. Bargain-
ning over the outcome could take many forms. Henry Ford and other industrial-
ists of the recognized without talking about how many of them had to be raised in order to jumpstart consumer spending. In retrospect, this seems like common sense, but, at the time, it went against the grain of capitalist
certain principles: the basic principle of the social contract that came to be known as Fordism. In that same spirit, today’s economic managers might entertain the reduction of debt burden, or the possibility of the mounting costs of wars, regressive tax cuts, corporate welfare, bank bailouts, and ill-guided monetary speculation.

In the years since the financial crash, the moral panic that characterized the earlier debt crunch was muted, even as the onset of public service staffs, was acknowledged as a matter of public concern. A new form of debt begins to take on a life of its own, the loan system, is most disadvantaged of all.

The morality of paying back one’s debts runs very deep, especially in American society, where refusal is almost akin to violating the incest taboo. Yet all of the admirable traits of the financial indus-
try in the wake of the crash revealed, for those who wanted to see, that the principle of honoring debts simply does not apply on Wall Street. With the veil cast aside, it was now easier to see how banks go about generating debt for others. Loans, after all, are no more than electronic figures on a computer screen. The character terms of the credit and credit that did not exist hitherto and they are created for the use of the lender. Money is lent into existence, and so financiers need to find borrowers to perform that magical act. In the same vein, they treat their own debts as matters to be rene-
gotiated or written off at will. Only the little people are actually required to pay them off in full.

If such a movement emerges, the stu-
ent debt crisis will prove to have been a key trigger. From the outset, Occupy
locations around the country filled with hundreds of thousands of people. In the face-to-face agora of Occupy. The act of casting aside the shame and humiliation that accompanies indebtedness (espe-
cially acute for working class borrow-
ers aspiring to enter the middle class) was an important kind of “coming out” for debtors, and it has been a power-
ful affective component of the political movement. By 2012, the average student debt was more than $27,000, having doubled since 2007. Defaults had also doubled in that same period of time. Of those who graduated in 2005, 41% are either delinquent or in default.

The Education Debt Trap

Much of the Occupy movement’s energy and rhetoric has focused on debt cri-
ses and unemployment facing the young—vital issues that will become more increasingly important if the governments of the advanced capitalist world follow tough on their threats to continue dismantling the tenuous system of social justice established in the middle of the last century. Yet, as a person on the other age of the age spectrum, I’d like to point out that the very same structural
crisis faces the aging populations of the world. The old are not, tradition-
ally, allies of the young. But looking closely at the practices of the financial system with regard to pensions reveal the same inequities and rapaciousness at work as we see with student debt.

The first fact to look at is demographic. The average age of the world’s popula-
tion has risen, is rising, and will continue to do so. We are already approach-
ing the point when it will be 50. The aging effect is strongest in the richest
countries but is found everywhere with the over-80s being the fastest growing
group. Partly this because life expectancy is constantly rising. However the decline in the birth rate—a trend linked to global development and to
decisions made by young couples—is just as important. Japan’s population is
shrinking as well as aging; the same is true of Italy.

There is certainly no need to panic about this, or to conclude, as many policymakers (and not just Republicans) have, that the only way to contain the problem is to massacre entitlement programs like Medicare and Social Security. The rise in life expectancy is good news and is accompanied by rising
Most of the initiatives that have sprung up in response to the student debt crisis are aimed at limited economic reforms, such as restoring bankruptcy provisions and other protections that are enjoyed by consumer debtors. But paying for education is not like buying a flat-screen TV, and student loans should not be packaged in the same way. Doing so would not alter the customary neoliberal practice of treating public goods, like education, as a profit center. The long list of developed, and developing, countries—none of them, incident to the US—each of which provide free public education demonstrate how different national priorities are elsewhere. The US is an outlier in this regard, and efforts to export the pay-per-model have met with strong student resistance, most recently, in Chile, England, and Quebec. The red square, symbol of the Quebec movement (carrement dans le rouge, “squarely in the red”) most recently became the clothing accessory of choice in campus towns across the U.S.

**Investment or Indenture?**

Analysts who have investigated Occupy’s claims about the 1% have concluded that all of them are politically manipulative for the upward redistribution of wealth, financial manipulation of debt ranks very high. But the imposition of debt is not just a mode of wealth accumulation, it is also a form of discipline and social control, with acute political consequences. This was most notable in the case of the IMF “debt trap” visited upon us by many postcolonial countries in the postwar decades. In the global South, public debt was being used as a tool to stave off further debt, and are compelled to think of their degree as a bargain for which their future wages have been traded. These are not conditions under which workers with political muscle might be cultivated, but they are perfectly serviceable to elites who do not want an educated, radical citizenry on their hands. This is one of the reasons why student debt abolition might be more effectively approached as the target of a political movement than one aimed at limited economic reforms. With wealth now diverted more exclusively to the 1% (as well as their close allies in the political class), the belief that education debt is a smart investment in a high-income future has eroded. Should we, instead, compare student debt to a form of indenture? While offensive to some, the analogy has been a useful provocation to many debtors and analysts of the topic. In a knowledge economy, where a college degree is considered a passport to a decent livelihood, workforce entrants must go into debt in return for the right to labor. This kind of contract is the essence of indenture. For the traditionally indentured, who today include tens of millions of migrant workers crisis (to reduce stress). None of keeping ourselves in good health, particularly is that everyone now needs a capital work has to be applied, in large part, to debt service on loans that were incurred simply to prepare themselves for work in the first place. The kinds of burdens that the household does confront with—education, housing, healthcare, and social reproduction— comprise all the costs that we alone now have to bear solely in order to subsidize and prepare ourselves for the workforce. Wages, if we can access them, are more and more used for paying back the debts taken on to position ourselves as fit in mind and body for the workforce. Though the war on drugs and the drug war the costs of their bad debts, fraud, and abuse have been substantial. In Latin America, populations as indolent or profligate, foreign financial agencies demand fiscal discipline to restore the public balance sheets. At this point, the choices for student bondholders to extract payments is not a direct political act. The upfront costs are more and more precarious.

**Financialization and its Antidote**

For those caught in the limbo of precarious labor, any remuneration gleaned from the ever-morphing landscape of capitalist work has to be applied, in large part, to debt service on loans that were incurred simply to prepare themselves for work in the first place. The kinds of burdens that the household does confront with—education, housing, healthcare, and social reproduction— comprise all the costs that we alone now have to bear solely in order to subsidize and prepare ourselves for the workforce. Wages, if we can access them, are more and more used for paying back the debts taken on to position ourselves as fit in mind and body for the workforce. Though the war on drugs and the drug war the costs of their bad debts, fraud, and abuse have been substantial. In Latin America, populations as indolent or profligate, foreign financial agencies demand fiscal discipline to restore the public balance sheets. At this point, the choices for student bondholders to extract payments is not a direct political act. The upfront costs are more and more precarious.

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**Popular protest is virtually guaranteed.** After a wave of “IMF riots” in several Latin American countries during the period of structural adjustment, governments in Ecuador (1999) and Argentina (2001) made the decision to default on their foreign debts, and Iceland also defaulted in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. The backlash to post-2008 austerity provoked massive protests all over Europe: Lithuania, Latvia, France, privatization) to call anew for a reduction in benefits and a weakening of the program’s coverage. But the overall aging of the population means that programs like Social Security and Medicare needed strengthening not weakening and this can best be done by taxing the wealthiest and the corporations. Most promising of all is a share levy such that all corporations have to issue new shares each year equivalent to ten percent of their profits and donate these securities to a network of social funds covering the entire nation. These funds would not be allowed to sell the shares but would hold them, using dividend income to finance new pensions and grants. Such a levy has the effect of slightly diluting the value of all shareholdings, wherever held. Shares held in tax havens would make their contribution no less than those held onshore. Right now corporations are making good profits but are not investing them; the levy could be revised to require corporations that plan to sell or to profit-taking in the present and the recent years the US authorities have reduced the amount of the FICA or Social Security contribution for younger and lower-paid employees. As a way of boosting employment at a time of protracted recession this is entirely justifi- But by reducing the revenue flowing into the Social Security system it has the danger that it will be seized on by some partisans of so-called “reform” (i.e. fitness at older ages. However, imagining that an aging society brings no extra costs would be a big mistake. Frailty does increase with age. Even in Canada, where single payer health care leads to better cost control, annual medical expenses for the over-70s are four times the size of those for the under-70s. The problem in the US is that there are strong lobbies favoring the partial or complete dismantling of relatively efficient public benefit systems in favour of inefficient commercial suppliers. Nowhere is this clearer than in the provision of pensions. Every employee contributes to the US Social Security fund and every contributor can claim his old age (and survivors) pension. The Social Security administration collects contributions from 140 million employees and pays out pensions to 45 million retirees and survivors. As far as sixty per cent of recipients are concerned, it is the Social Security check that raises them above the poverty line. This massive social program is administered by just 70,000 employees on average salaries, all in the greatest contrast to Wall Street superstars. The Social Security program’s coverage comprises all the costs that we alone now have to bear solely in order to subsidize and prepare ourselves for the workforce. Wages, if we can access them, are more and more used for paying back the debts taken on to position ourselves as fit in mind and body for the workforce. Though the war on drugs and the drug war the costs of their bad debts, fraud, and abuse have been substantial. In Latin America, populations as indolent or profligate, foreign financial agencies demand fiscal discipline to restore the public balance sheets. At this point, the choices for student bondholders to extract payments is not a direct political act. The upfront costs are more and more precarious.

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Isabelle Nastasia and Conor Tomás Reed

RADICAL EDUCATION NATION

How students and teachers can work together beyond elections

Last month the National Student Power Convergence welcomed over 300 people from around the U.S., as well as organizers from Quebec, Mexico, and Puerto Rico—for five days in Columbus, Ohio to envision, educate, eat, entertain, and scheme. Inspired by the Quebec strike, the Chilean student protests, Mexico’s #YoSoy132, and other international uprisings, we are beginning to build the kind of nationally coordinated student movement needed to successfully challenge the course of higher education in this country.

Two narratives broadly defined the students in attendance. The first focused on middle-class students who are coming to terms with an unprecedented and intimidating set of challenges: a rapidly accelerating environmental crisis and the failed promises of the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” paradigm by way of mounting student debt and dismal job opportunities. The second narrative involved the students and youth for whom a decent future was never promised. This includes, but is not limited to, young people who are trapped in the school-to-prison pipeline, the Dreamers (undocumented youth who have no access to student loans or federal financial assistance for college), and push-outs (most commonly known as “drop-outs”) who have no access to support systems taken for granted by middle-class students.

The dream of deising a strategy of movement building that sits at the nexus of these two narratives is what drew many to Ohio. Across these two realities (and the many realities above, under, and in between), Millennials are sick and tired of being fucked over. When these two narratives can fight alongside one another with a strategy that works towards concrete gains, we will build a real youth and student power movement. The convergence demonstrated that we are already well on our way. In the words of Gloria Anzaldua in This Bridge Called Home, our movement is in the process of “erecting new bridges.” We’re loosening the grip of outmoded methods and ideas in order to allow new ways of being and acting to emerge, but we’re not totally abandoning the old—we’re building on it.

In addition, when populations are compelled to privately debt-finance the provision of basic social goods, we might consider these to be “anti-social debts,” because they violate the mutualist foundations of society as such. Here I am referring to what the Chinese call the “three mountains” of education, housing, and healthcare, all weighing heavily on the shoulders of the people. Any representative government that permits banks to impose these harms on an unprotected populace has all but forfeited its democratic legitimacy, a lesson that is all too obvious in the election season we are currently enduring.

Andrew Ross teaches at NYU, and is a member of the Occupy Student Debt Campaign and the OWS Strike Debt Assembly.

SARAH KNUCKEY

Reflections on Documenting and Reporting on Government Abuses of Protest Rights

In July 2012, the Protest and Assembly Rights Project—a national consortium of lawyers, professors, and law students at law school clinics across the U.S.—released a 132 page report documenting rights violations by NYC authorities in their response to Occupy Wall Street.

Based on 8 months of investigations, the report documented extensive violations, including excessive police force, unjustified arrests, abuse of journalists, unlawful closure of public space, pervasive surveillance, and impunity for abuse. The report called for a full review of the city’s response, the creation of an independent inspector general for the police, investigations and prosecutions of officers, and new NYPD protest policing guidelines to protect against rights violations. The report also called for federal intervention, in the absence of an adequate NYC response, and was submitted as a complaint to the Department of Justice and the United Nations. The report is available at: http://www.chrgj.org/projects/docs/supportingreport.pdf

n+1 asked one of the report’s primary authors, Sarah Knuckey—a human rights lawyer, professor at NYU School of Law, and National Lawyers Guild legal observer—to reflect on the project, why the report was written, what the response to it has been, and what the next steps are.

At an Occupy protest one evening this past summer, I was legal observing and watched as police tackled a protester to the ground and cuff him as he screamed out in pain. His offence, apparently, was crossing the street at the wrong time. I knelt down a few feet from his face, to document what was happening, and to speak to him so that in the midst of the violence he could at least hear a voice seeking his name and assuring legal assistance. As I did, I saw an NYPD officer pull back his boot and kick the already restrained protester hard in the face. With others, I jumped up and tried to record the officer’s badge number and name. The
officer turned away, hiding himself from those who had witnessed him so blatantly abuse his power. Lines of other officers prevented us from obtaining the officer’s name, and a senior officer helped him escape the scene in an NYPD van.

Shortly after this incident, baton-wielding police prevented the same group of peaceful protesters from accessing a public park—which was clearly open to other New Yorkers and to tourists—by threatening arrest. The protesters responded with clear assertions of their rights. But the material consequences of rights violations, to apply political pressure to stop abuses, and to make protest rights meaningful where they matter—in the streets. New York City authorities committed injustices against protesters constantly, and got away with it. The pervasive pattern of abusive policing has had both an immediate and long-term impact of suppressing protest. Our report documented extensive chilling effects. People became afraid of being arbitrarily arrested, constantly surveilled, or physically injured while simply gathering with others in public spaces or attempting to report on the protests.

Our core goal was to document precisely, objectively, and comprehensively what was happening at the micro incident level, and to illuminate the patterns of government abuse. In one sense, this is a simple act of witnessing, truth-telling, and historical record-making. The refrain of city authorities—“The protesters are a danger! Our policing is lawful and proper!”—bore little resemblance to the facts. We believed it essential that the wrongs of the state be clearly articulated, and that its attempts to monopolize the narrative be challenged.

We also aimed to support individual political subjecthood by securing a path through which personal narratives could be expressed. The injustices of impunity and non-recognition exacerbate the original rights violations. We aimed through interviews and reporting to facilitate individuals overcoming some of the barriers that prevent them from acting politically. As we write this, police are again targeting protesters with tear gas.

To overcome these barriers, student unions need to change the current political and cultural climate. We are building a new kind of infrastructure that will enable students to activate their power. We aim to reframe the current crisis as an opportunity for political transformation. Our analysis of police abuse highlights the need for a broader critique of the political economy and its role in facilitating police abuse.

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the disempowering and alienating effects of experiencing abuse, and often not being able to address it. We also aimed to participate in the larger project of bringing human rights ‘home’ to the U.S., and to articulate the international law binding upon the U.S. government. Crucially, we wanted to show clearly to the many other countries watching NYFPD policing that its practices breached international law and should not be followed. This became a key goal after other countries, including Indone-
sia and Syria, attempted to rhetorically justify their own abuses of protest rights by pointing to NYFD practices. We also aimed to teach our students how to become social justice advocates, and to deepen and promote careful investiga-
tion methods that others could also use (attentive to legal risks, retraumatization, standards of proof).

We intended to make clear the value of “assembly,” beyond protesting for or against something. Occupy’s use of public space was about far more than express-
ing pre-determined ideas. It was about bringing people together, to deliberate, to exchange ideas, to organize, to model participatory democracy, and to create the space needed to formulate grievances and goals. These broader aspects of political assembly are also protected by law, and are crucial in a healthy democracy.

Most importantly, we wanted our documentation and analysis to be lever-
aged for meaningful material impacts. We wanted to produce a thorough report that would force a serious government response. The ambitious aim, then, was to contribute to the ongoing efforts of many to reform the NYPD. These include legal, policy, and community efforts around stop and frisk, the widespread surveillance of Muslim populations, and other discriminatory, unjustified, and unlawful practices.

Any effort to support the achievement of long-term reform in policing practices requires understanding the dynamics of current abuses, and their immediate as well as deep-seated structural causes. Long-term reform also necessitates devel-
oping a map of the pressure points, net-
works, actors, laws, and institutions that can be leveraged to force real change. This is why we analyzed current abuses in their historical and international contexts, and sought to make visible the complex web in which any individual abuse is situated. It is also why we submitted it as a formal complaint to a range of city, federal, and international authorities, and see it as one piece in a larger reform effort.

Police abuses are always the result of a myriad of factors (e.g. simple incompetence, individual “bad apples”, poor train-
ing, cultures of impunity, poor oversight structures, a lack of civilian account-
ability). In New York, the key factor is the failure of political will on the part of senior officials. The police department could readily change course and conduct rights-respecting protest policing. We can imagine the Mayor responding to the fact that protesters as they are required to by domes-
tic and international law – by actively facilitating them, or simply leaving them alone. The City does not, because this is not feasible, but because of limited incentives for truly accountable polic-
ing, and because those at the top have little interest in seeing meaningful and/ or growing protests in the streets of New York.

The most important question then is to consider what pressures can be brought to bear to force a change in political will so that rights-respecting policing is promoted in New York. When we released our report, there was widespread and favorable media coverage, and resulting public pressure on authorities. Many indi-
viduals and groups from across the U.S. and beyond contacted us, expressing their gratitude, sharing similar abuses faced in other locations, wanting to collaborate on initiatives. We also invited requests to see the report in education materials for police, and our report is cited as evidence of protest suppression in ongoing federal litigation.

But NYC authorities said nothing. What kind of a government is handing a report detailing hundreds of abuses of its citizens, and does absolutely nothing? The silence of the authorities only reinforces a central finding of our report: the NYPD engages in underhanded policing, rein-
forced by pervasive impunity for official abuse. The Mayor and the NYPD have so insulated themselves from the basic precepts of democratically accountable policing that they do not even feel they need to answer documented allegations of abuse.

To begin to address the NYPD’s lack of accountability and transparency in its policies and actions, we are seeking police documents through freedom of informa-
tion requests. And because NYC authori-
ties have refused to respond to the fact that we are seeking federal intervention from the Department of Justice. With respect to individual abuses, we will continue on-site legal observing with the National Law-
yers Guild, and will testify in court about any unjustified arrests or use of force we witnessed. Our project will also be releas-
ing further reports on responses in other cities, including Boston, Charlotte, Oak-
land and San Francisco. And, importantly, because the kinds of abuses we have seen here in NYC are far from isolated, we have requested hearings in November this year before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the regional human rights body for the Americas, on the crim-
inalization of dissent across the region. We hope to bring together representatives from across the Americas – e.g. from the US, Canada, Mexico, Chile, Ecuador – to testify about the trends of protest polic-
ing, and to work at the regional level to promote rights-respecting policing. Peaceful protests and political assem-
bles are necessary in all democracies, and key to democratic reform and socioeco-
nomic justice. If we let the abuses of the past year remain unaddressed, we will not only allow impunity to be further entrenched, but we will see the NYPD’s protest suppression tactics repeat, spread, and stymie future justice movements. Indeed, we have already seen other police departments copy the NYPD’s abuses. It is common the world over for a govern-
ment to use the abuse of its citizens to simply ignore allegations and calls for change, in the hope that they will go away. But the NYC government’s abuses and nonresponsiveness have only strengthened our resolve to work with others to spend the structures enabling official impunity and anti-democratic practices.

M I C H A E L  S A N D M E L

Climate and Occupy

Being a climate change activist has sometimes felt a little bit like being one of those guys who stands outside rock shows wearing a sandwich board with pictures of hell and handing out leaflets about redemption and the end of the world. It’s isolating, it bums a lot of other people out to the point where they ignore what you have to say, and it requires a certain amount of faith. It’s not just faith in the scientific method — although of course, you have to accept the externalize data and their predictions to gain traction. It’s also faith that we can’t feel the climate changing on a day-to-day basis. That’s important, but perhaps more importantly, you need to have faith in other people and their ability to adapt to new information. That’s the really tough part.

It’s been pretty well documented that avoiding catastrophic changes to the biosphere, especially in a way that is even remotely equitable, will require revolutionary confrontations of both ways of thinking and participants. That you can’t feel the climate changing on a day-to-day basis. That’s important, but perhaps more importantly, you need to have faith in other people and their ability to adapt to new information. That’s the really tough part.

Looking ahead, Chilean student leaders Camila Vallejo and Noam Titel-
man will speak in NYC in October, sharing advice and wisdom. Interna-
tional days of action on October 18th and November 14th through 21st will
offer us space to express and then assess our coordinated power on cam-
putes and in the streets. As we focus on doing each step right, we’re also
cozignant that we’re running out of time fast. As Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, “capitlism is choosing to drown itself rather than die.” In contrast, those of us who are committed to building a radical movement believe that we can save ourselves if we choose to act together.

One major city-wide effort to sustain political education is through the Free University Workshop series will highlight past and present models of organization and anti-oppression strategies each day that can combine learning and strategizing.

Free University workshop series will highlight past and present models of organization and anti-oppression strategies each day that can combine lessons from the massive movements in Quebec, Chile, and elsewhere with the particular attention this country’s left has developed around intersectional issues. Each day will begin at 2pm with shared community agreements, followed by workshops, skills-shares, relocated classes, and performances, as well as recurring thematic areas and activities like an artists bloc, writers bloc, poetry speak-out, and diverse NYC organizations’ info hubs. An education visioning assembly at 6pm will round out each night. Free U will welcome new and returning participants like Rebecca Solnit, Ben Katchor, Ruth Gilmore, and members of CLASSE’s executive committee to join thousands of people from New York and around the world to advocate for education as a human right and demonstrate our ability to implement free education for all.
was to see the rapid rise of Occupy. I still smile when I think about bumping into my freshman roommate, a charming but generally apolitical film major from Missouri, amidst the chaos of 10,000 students marching down Broad way. As many will attest, the collective discovery of new political possibilities in those early weeks was beyond invigorating.

And yet, for all of the deep and critical discussion happening in Zuccotti, on the mainstream media, in social media, and in classrooms, as to whether or not the American system was fair, there seemed to be an absence of discussion as to whether or not it was sustainable. In fact, between September 17, 2011, when protesters first arrived in Manhattan’s financial district, and April 1, 2012, the New York Times published 1,274 articles, opinion pieces, and blog posts mentioning Occupy Wall Street. Of these, just 15 included any mention of an environmental dimension to the movement. Of these 15, only one had a headline more than lip service to environmental concerns. Those few writers who did seriously consider the environment tended to act as if they themselves had made the connection between ecology, economics, and political activism, treating the protesters as inarticulate symbols of social discontent, rather than as critical voices for socio-environmental change. But was this really the case? I knew lots of brilliant environmentalists who were to f In an attempt to answer this question (and to complete a senior thesis), I went through the minutes of every NYC General Assembly and Spokes Council meeting from September 17 until May Day.

I wanted to understand why, despite the prevalence of environmentalists in the movement, the question of global socio-environmental justice went through the minutes of every NYC General Assembly and Spokes Council meeting from September 17 until May Day. I looked closely at the coverage of the Occupy movement in national newspapers. I sat in on conference calls with the Occupy Research collective and analyzed their survey data. I even went through the minutes of every NYC General Assembly and Spokes Council meeting from September 17 until May Day.

I wanted to understand why, despite the prevalence of environmentalists in the movement, the question of global socio-environmental justice seemed to have been marginalized, especially in media representations of the movement, in favor of a more myopic conception of domestic economic equity. As is usually the case with social research I was only able to come up with tentative answers, best guesses based on patterns in the available evidence.

I came to believe that concerns about climate had tended to be the domain of a discrete group of self-identified environmentalists who, despite their best efforts, had not been able to shape the movement’s (already minimal) self-narration because they weren’t able or willing to act fast enough and because they couldn’t break away from their own self-perception as an interest group. A lot of people forget that when the call was first put out to Occupy Wall St. there was a plan to come together and decide on “one simple demand,” but that this plan was quickly abandoned and replaced by a four-day process of crafting the Principles of Solidarity, which would be the movement’s first public statement to the world.

GA minutes show that when the final statement was put to the group on September 23rd, one member of the assembly (I’ve never been able to figure out who) moved to block consensus on the grounds that the document contained no language about the environment. This was at the end of a very long meeting and, after being informed that the principles were a “living document” and could be amended at any time (they have yet to be amended), the dissenter removed the block and the document was agreed upon. It was quickly posted online and picked up by various news outlets. About a week later, 700 protesters were arrested while crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, and Occupy exploded globally. In New York, the massive influx of new people and new energy was absorbed, in large part, by the creation of dozens of working groups, including many with an environmental bent. However, the growth of the movement was so rapid and so decentralized that it became increasingly difficult for Occupiers to play an active role in defining themselves.

Meanwhile, the media took one look at the rhetoric of those early Zucotti documents and found a neat descriptive space within tired political narratives. Occupiers became, depending on your ideological bent, either “dirty hippies” or “populists.” They had lost control of their own story almost as quickly as they had started telling it. The members of the environmentalist working groups certainly did themselves no favors by self-segregating into an autonomous “eco-cluster” with little connection to the General Assembly or other core operational groups, but by that point it was probably too late to alter the OWF’s “brand.” Occupy had made its dent in the larger political narrative. It had “changed the conversation” but most of America was still ignoring the elephant in the room.

I often wonder what I would have done had I been at those early General Assemblies. Perhaps I would have been able to steer things in a more climate-focused direction. Or, perhaps in that moment, surrounded by the homeless, the unemployed, and the uninsured I would have felt some hesitancy about harping on an invisible issue. Perhaps I would have taken the same position as an organizer who told me what his thoughts had been at the time. “Environmental issues,” he told me, “were a really good long term thing to merge into the momentum of what Occupy represented: people rediscovering the power of direct action and civil disobedience.” I don’t know what I would have done. I’m pretty sure that there will be another crisis. Finance capitalism is still a house of cards, the political system is still dominated by a tiny elite, and extreme weather events and drought are making climate change a visible and urgent issue for millions. I intend to keep organizing as intelligently, strategically, creatively, and with as much passion as I can. I know that others will do the same and I hold out faith that good ideas, under the right set of conditions, will catch on.

Still, the police waited impassive behind their masks. When they raised their rifles again the canisters exploding around us untethered despair like birds unhooked from a tree. Fear and remorse flew in chance combinations, leapt from shoulder to shoulder, lighted on strangers who could no longer tell whose tears they shed. The exile forgot her courtyard while a father grew inconsolable for characters from a language he didn’t recognize. Clutched by a prisoner’s impatience, a historian thought of flight, a hope of teenagers scolded one another on the mispent chances of other decade’s struggles. A vet without legs rubbed at his thighs.

One by one, embarrased, flushing our eyes of the burning, alien grief,icks slipped into the night, sought doorways like a disavowal.

Later, the querulous disappointment of travelers would enter the poets’ verse, and the tourists, returning home, found themselves arrayed in the melancholy of the starry sky.

A thousand griefs ascended from the small metal tin, each sorrow finding its eye. The aged, choking on fumes, were seized by regret while near the lines of police poets dashed rags in vinegar murmuring the names of their beloved. Fever and visions settled among us. The fractions secretaries tended all week rose before them like fearful birds. Carpenters threw down their tools. On the edge of the square an exile wept for the sea. Even tourists swept into the tumult thought plaintively of the distances they had crossed as though fleeing an edict. Heart-sore we ran from the chemical vapor, but three times the drums called us back. Our sorrow shinnered in the air like water catching light. A voice cried out, “Tangled in this net of plumes a thousand what is broken, discarded, and lost waits a new kingdom where silence possesses its alphabet.” The crowd rallied, the dead swelling our ranks. First loves were glimpsed beneath the blows of a truncheon. A cadre in black chanted, “The marsh beneath the street, the marsh beneath the street.”

GREG VARGO

TEARGAS POEM
Assembling, Generally

On March 17, the occupation’s six-month anniversary, a crowd of 3,000 assembled to briefly and joyfully re-occupy Zuccotti Park. After many were bruised, bloodied, and hauled away by the cops, marches proved Manhattan. The next morning, a handful of Occupiers revealed they’d spent the night in Union Square, and the infrastructure of the movement began to reinstate itself in the park: the info table, the library, and a loose grid of card-board signs all appeared in the square.

It had been a long winter: first in Zuccotti with hand warmers, later under the fluorescent lights and underwater acoustics of 60 Wall, eventually through what seemed like every church and meeting space that would have us. But meetings, and the processes they entailed—the seemingly endless reminders not to jump stack or block just from spite, the presence of constant disruptors, the cyclical, often unsuccessful efforts to reach consensus—were far more difficult to greet zealously without the invigorating balance of a more informal and organic public commons.

Faced with the option of making the trip from Union Square to 60 Wall for the customary General Assembly, most declined.

“It’s been such a long couple of weeks,” one gangly live streamer said. “No more meetings. Can’t we just be here, together, for a second?”

But the General Assembly had been our only center of gravity for months. It’s on the website, someone said. We have to go. Many shrugged it off, but a handful of occupiers descended beneath the park and boarded the 4 train to Wall Street. There were plenty of people at 60 Wall—chess-playing locals, businessmen working late, a few homeless men slumped uncomfortably in corners pretending not to be asleep. But the absence of occupiers reinforced the perception that Things Had Changed. The heat and light of Zuccotti had returned, in Union Square, and we were downtown living in the past.

What to do? 10 people make not the New York City General Assembly. A thin woman with blue streaks in her black hair suggested the wisest option was to bring the meeting to Union Square: GA was the proper format to decide what the new occupation would look like. But someone else countered that many of those most committed to the tactic of occupation—by now, a mixture of travelers, die-hards, and folks without a better place to sleep—had expressed disinterest in having a GA. They didn’t want the money, either.

Fucking the GA, self-described “real occupiers” had been saying for months, and there was no denying that many people had come to agree: what had once been a forum attended daily by hundreds had dwindled to maybe 75 on a good night. The money had been a big part of the problem. What had once seemed infinite—hundreds of thousands of dollars, mostly from before the great power-washing of Liberty Square—had dwindled to a mere hundred grand before the GA consented to a contentious “spending freeze” on a frostbitten midwinter night. The money kept evaporating even after the freeze, sublimated by reoccurring budgets left on loop, and about twelve grand still remained.

The freeze was supposed to re-generalize the General Assembly, to free it of constant, divisive, minefield-laden debates about spending. But in the weeks since, full of frustrating discussions about values and tense, occasionally violent debates about accountability, it seemed we’d waited too long. Too many people motivated to prefiguratively build consensus had given up, and many who remained seemed to forget what the GA had once been like, before the eviction, when there were immediate things for us all to make decisions about, together.

The facilitated conversation at 60 Wall eventually developed a consensus: we’d simply go to Union Square and ask whether people wanted to have a GA. Twenty minutes later, the returning group mic-checked across Union Square to a loose crowd assembled on the southern side of the park: occupiers, the kids who frequented the square, passers-by intrigued by the signs and festive mood. The conversation began with an open stack, and when one of the first speakers opened with “Is this really the GA?” the question felt somehow irrelevant.

“How are we occupiers?” someone asked. “Are we assembled?” There were a few hoots. “Then what does it matter if we’re The GA?”

The group agreed to continue the conversation in breakout groups, which one occupier nearby noted, “was pretty much what we were doing anyway.”

The only consensus reached was a unanimous uptwinkling in solidarity with the Trayvon Martin Million Hoodie March set for the next evening.

For two more days, Union Square felt like real freedom. Occupiers slept openly for the first time since November, curled up on top of their cardboard signs beside mountainous backpacks. The network once again had a physical point of intersection, and emergent collaborations bloomed: de-escalation discussions, working group meetings, new projects. “The winter was worth it,” someone pointed out. “We made it.” No GA met in Union Square, but it didn’t mean we weren’t connected. We were: when, if, and because we wanted to be.

One friend, a fellow minutes-taker, became particularly distressed as the GA moved further still from the center of the movement. “How can we abandon the process we’ve spent so long perfecting?” she asked. But her question

MOLLY OSBERG AND TIM “DICEY” FITZGERALD

A STATEMENT

August 28, 2012

Late this summer, two Portland activ-ists were served with subpoenas to appear before a federal grand jury in Seattle. The two have since publicly announced they will not cooperate. The subpoenas came in the wake of FBI and Joint Terrorist Task Force raids on the homes of activists throughout the Pacific Northwest, raids that reportedly focused on the seizure of technology, black clothing, and “anarchist literature.” Though warrants for the seizure of such items were ostensibly connected to property damage sustained during May Day protests in Seattle, it has been widely speculated that the call to appear before the grand jury serves almost exclusively as an intimidation tactic. The second grand jury meeting, previously scheduled for August 30th, has been postponed, but it remains likely that if the two continue to remain silent they will face substantial jail time.

My name is Leah-Lynn Plante, and I am one of the people who has been subpoenaed to a secret grand jury meeting in Seattle on August 30.

This will be the second time I have appeared before the grand jury, and the second time I have refused to testify. The first time was on August 2. I appeared, as ordered, and I identified myself. Then the US Attorney asked if I would be willing to answer her questions. I said, No, and was issued another subpoena, this time for the 30th.

A month later, my answer is still the same. No, I will not answer their questions. I believe that these hearings are politically motivated. The government wants to use them to collect information that it can use in a campaign of repression. I refuse to have any part of it.

It is likely that the government will put me in jail for that refusal. I hate the very idea of prison. But if I were to go to prison, I would not be alone. I can only speak for myself, but I have every faith that the others subpoenaed to these hearings will likewise refuse. And I know that hundreds of people have called the US Attorney demanding that they end this tribunal. Hundreds of organizations, representing thousands of people, signed onto a statement expressing solidarity with those of us under attack and demanding an end to this sort of repression.

I know that those people will continue to support me, and the others subpoenaed, and the targets of the investigation. That spirit of solidarity is exactly what the state fears. It is the source of our strength, yours and mine. And that strength shows itself in every act of resistance.

Solidarity is What the State Fears Because We Must

-Leah Lynne Plant

LEAH-LYNN PLANTE

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begged us to consider the true function of consensus, and of assembling at all. Amidst the collaborative rebirth it seemed hard to imagine that the value of the process ended after the last formal proposal was made.

We were familiar with the consensus model before OWS, from radical youth organizations and our old housing co-operative, but never before had the two of us seen it used so publicly, nor on such scale. To organize through consensus is to fundamentally re-articulate one’s own identity as a political and social being.

As children, many of us are taught to share because it is right; grown, we may notice the suggestion often comes from those who exercise power, and that it is not our ideas or visions but our resources they desire. Growing up with these contradictions, reaching consensus—a mutually agreeable conclusion based on expressed needs—is by definition a deeply radical pursuit.

Far beyond learning hand signals, it requires trust.

So it’s no wonder we have trouble differentiating our tools: a stand-alone or a block, a process or a game played to win. The regular forum the GA became, where the general public struggled—often for the first time—with collective decision-making helped many grapple with the difference. And while the dissolution of the GA as we knew it left us with a void of sorts, we cannot underestimate its importance as a value system as much as a decision-making process, or forget the impact it had far beyond Liberty Square, or 60 Wall or, for that matter, Seattle. Our pursuit of consensus continues.

On the second night in Union Square, the cops came back, at least 300 of them, filing down the park steps two-by-two. They pushed the exhausted occupiers out, barricaded the stairs, and made a few arrests for good measure. The message was more than clear: yeah, no. It was the last night we slept there without harassment, now on the sidewalk outside the barricades, exiled once more.

The next evening, occupiers assembled in large numbers to decide how to deal with the expected 12am eviction from Union Square. A consensus was necessary, and one quickly emerged. There would be tactical training, gameplay with the police, and then a soapbox in the tradition of the outdoor speak-outs that preceded Bloombergville and OWS.

Sure enough, the police showed up just before midnight and organizers executed the first iteration of what would come to be known as Midnight Eviction Theatre. Deinstitutionalizing our collaborative ethic, the movement’s core strength, had opened space for us to take advantage of the cops’ robotic predictability.

We had new tools, too, that adapted that core strength into new forms. Suddenly someone began to hop up and down: “hup hup hup hup,” they yipped, and suddenly 150 people were doing the same. For perhaps the first time, a cop smiled.

Over the preceding weeks the +Brigades (pronounced “plus brigades”) had been holding workshops to train us to recognize keywords, a language designed specifically to enable horizontal tactical response. Like the human microphone, these tools were automatically available to anyone who knew how to use them, provided there was enough of a consensus around to garner participation.

The huppers clumped together and +Brigades reviewed their kit: “wall” instantly generates an arm-to-arm blockade in any direction; “melt” means an instant but temporary “die-in”; “charge” can send hundreds running towards an agreed-upon point; “civilian” allows us to relocate undetected. Before long, the assembled multitudes were moving as one, up and down the barricades, laughing and yelling and charging and melting and humping once again.

Eventually the group returned to the center of the stairs. “Wall north,” someone suggested, and after a pause, the unit quickly pivoted towards the barricades. “Charge and melt?” someone asked, and everyone raised their hands in agreement. Why not?

“CHARGE!” the front line shouted, hurtling towards the barricades. Spectators gasped, the officers directly facing the brigade visibly flinched, and the unit melted into a puddle of laughter inches from impact.

After things settled, a group sat to brainstorm for the next evening. “How about Barricade Burlesque?” “Let’s play capture the flag.” Someone else wanted to challenge the police to a rap battle—and we’ll win, because the cops will ignore us! Unless they don’t, and that’s a win too!” “Let’s build a people’s barricade!” someone shouted out, gigging. “We can make it out of donuts.”

To passers-by, this no doubt seemed like fun and games—joking around, letting off steam. But after 6 months of working together, we were equipped to execute all four ideas, and many others, over the coming nights. The police stepped up too, abruptly arresting people for sleeping, then summoning the Department of Sanitation to justify pushing us around. But each day, we reached immediate, unifying, and creative agreements when we needed to, putting them into action by night. Fuck the GA, indeed.

Something extraordinary happened recently that reminded us of the GA’s larger impact. An old friend, Kevin, moved to New York after being absent from our lives for years. Over drinks in the kitchen this time around, it took us about ten minutes to get into the subject of OWS.

While we had toiled over the General Assembly, taking notes on the devolving process as our breath came out in clouds, our old friend fled the poor job prospects in the States for a small town in Italy, where he found work organizing performing arts festivals. The first events he helped threw were very successful, but the organizers “were getting a steady stream of information on the Spanish Indignados and the Occupy movement,” he explained to us, “and we became very inspired by the use of consensus discussion.”

His organizing committee jumped from five to fifteen, and from November through June they met regularly to plan their festival, forming autonomous committees which would then make proposals to the larger body using formal consensus. In the parlance of decentralization, what Kevin was doing in Italy was building an affinity group.

Affinity groups—traditionally, small groups of ten to fifteen based on shared interests or values—like the +Brigades, Mutant Legal, ICU, H.B., and the Silent Ninjas, along with many working groups and others, have taken on new significance in the post-NYCGA era. Affinity groups vary in form, and can be open or closed, but they use consensus, value autonomy and, most importantly, provide spaces where trust can grow. The challenges of the General Assembly eroded good faith, but affinity groups can be safe spaces for us to heal, process, and struggle within, so that we can endure our encounters with police, our conflicts with each other, our moments of disillusionment and stress, without burning out entirely.

Is this a Balkanization, as suggested by our friend the minutes-taker, or is it a tactical change in practice? It is probably a little bit of both. We’d prefer to have an occupation; we’d prefer that our public spaces—and the public—were ready to be safe, but oppression, repression, and competition still characterize our world. We treasure our togetherness, but a distributed model has always been integral to our movement. How many days passed between Occupy Wall Street and “occupy everything?”

A network of groups—affinity groups, project groups, working groups, general assemblies, neighborhood assemblies, worker-owned cooperatives, and new forms yet to spontaneously develop—was always part of the plan. The police and their minders, who have never understood who nor what we are, mistook our tents for our intention, and in kicking them out they have pushed us ahead.

JONATHAN MATTHEW SMUCKER

Falling in love with ourselves

In late October of last year my cousin came down to Liberty Square, then home of a thriving Occupy Wall Street, to meet me for a drink. He arrived early so he could check things out for himself. I was eager to hear his impressions.

“What stood out to me,” he told me at a bar around the corner, “was how you all are recreating society—or creating a microcosm of society. It’s all there: a kitchen, a medical tent, a security force, a public library, and a whole alternative decision-making structure. It’s fascinating!”

Much has been made about the prefigurative aspects of Occupy Wall Street and the Occupy encampments across the country, when they existed. The camps, for example, served as more than just a protest, more than just a tactic. Participants consciously prefigured the kind of society that they were striving to build. It was indeed a compelling model for my cousin—or for any stranger—to witness. In the two months of the physical occupation of
Liberty Square, newcomers like him could walk in off the street and join our world—could even speak up during a General Assembly meeting if they felt so moved. Everyone's participation was welcomed. A modified consensus decision-making process is used in the General Assembly and in working group meetings so that decisions have to take into account everyone's input and ideas, thus prefiguring a kind of direct democracy lacking in the wider world, particularly in the realm of mainstream politics.

“It's kind of utopian,” my cousin suggested.

“I hope not!” I replied.

While I believe that consensus and participation are important principles in democratic grassroots organizing, I'm also not as enamored with process as many folks are. In practice, I've often found aspects of consensus-based processes deeply dysfunctional. I take that in stride and with patience. Social movements are messy and it takes a while to figure out good and functional processes for democratic decision-making and accountability.

What is striking though is how these processes and rituals have come to stand in for a strategy for many participants. Particular forms of process—from mic-checks to sparkler fingers to making space where everyone who wants to can speak—have often become confused with political content (i.e. goals or a platform).

This is not at all to denigrate these particular forms. Nor is it even to dismiss the importance of collective ritual in protest and challenger movements. Collective ritual fosters strong group identity, cohesion, and solidarity. Participants’ willingness to give of themselves depends on this strong sense of solidarity and identity. But if our intention is to change the world—not just prefigure a utopian vision, with no idea about how to actualize it—then these critical collective rituals must take their place within a larger overarching strategic framework.

“The attribute ‘utopian’ does not apply to political will in general, but to specific wills which are incapable of relating means to end, and hence are not even wills, but idle whims, dreams, longings, etc.” Antonio Gramsci wrote in his *Prison Notebooks*, elaborating a definition of utopianism that goes further than its popular notion of rosy-eyed visions of how the world could one day be. Gramsci dismisses utopians not for the content of their vision of the future, but for their lack of a vision or plan for how to move from Point A to Point B, from present reality to realized vision. In other words, dreaming about how the world might possibly someday be is not the same as political struggle—even when the dreams are punctuated with dramatic public spectacles.

At Liberty Square we had created a feeling of utopianism. Utopianism as a feeling is hardly about the future; it is something that is felt—often overwhelmingly so—here and now. At Occupy I began to wonder whether participants’ sense of a strong integrated identity was itself the utopia they were after? What if the thing we are missing, the thing we are lacking—the thing we are longing for most—is a sense of an integrated existence in a cohesive community? And what if that longing can be so potent it can eclipse the drive to affect change in the broader world?

I believe that this longing for integrated existence and group identity provides much of the conviction behind prefigurative politics—more so than any stated instrumental goals. So many of us feel alienated and isolated in our everyday lives. Others have already hypothesized that the dispersal of group identities in modern societies—accelerated with the further development of capitalism and corresponding rise of individualism in highly industrialized nations—may be a root cause of many mental illnesses and of anomie. If so, would it not also be the root of our deepest longings? Perhaps this lack, this longing, attaches itself in some people—including many who gravitate to social movements—to issues of injustice, partly from resonance and compassion, but also as fetish objects that stand in for our hope of completion, for the filling of our lack.

The problem with this arrangement is political. Insofar as participants are motivated by the hope of psychic completion (by community and a strong sense of belonging) as opposed to instrumental political goals (i.e. to concretely change X in the world), their focus will likely shift to deepening group identity over bolstering the group's external achievements. After all, the sense of utopia-as-group-belonging can be accomplished without ever having to actually win anything. This is how a group's internal processes can come to stand in for a strategy. Our tactics become valued more for their self-expressive and group-benefiting capacities than for their instrumentality. The participant motivated more by the group itself than by the group's accomplishments will likely gravitate toward self-referential tactics, rituals, and rhetoric. This, in turn, can lead the core of a potentially popular movement to insularity, isolation, and impotency.

“There is a danger,” Slavoj Žižek warned us last fall at Liberty Square. “Don’t fall in love with yourselves. We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives. Will there be any changes then?”

Žižek warned us to not fixate on our own image in the mirror; to not let love of our own liberation devolve into narcissism. Our challenge is to build and celebrate our community—including the deeply motivating feelings of belonging and solidarity we experience—while also keeping our eyes on the prize of real-world victories. Valuing the internal life of the social movements we are part of—our spaces, our culture, our rituals, our processes, etc.—is important, but we have to balance this with the value we place on what our movements actually achieve.
ALL ROADS LEAD TO WALL STREET

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