



Arts and Labor. May Day signs. 2012.

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Occupy made its first claim on me as a neighbor (living not all that far from Zuccotti Park), then, in quick succession, it drew me in as a participant and organizer. In each of these capacities, I was beguiled by the real-time attempt to give substance to a slogan—“This Is What Democracy Looks Like”—that had been in circulation for more than a decade within the global justice movement. Catchwords of this sort aren’t supposed to be fully fleshed out as practical propositions. But OWS’s physical circumstances presented an ace opportunity to do so. The most visible effort was the prefigurative micro-community that set up shop in Zuccotti Park, guided by principles of mutual aid and self-organization. Because Occupy became a media darling overnight, the feat of trying out the anarchist dream of “building a new world in the shell of the old” was given prime-time exposure, both in the world press and also in the movement’s own extensive media apparatus. At the center of it all were the general assemblies. In their heyday, they were nothing short of sublime. Even if this wasn’t the kind of direct democracy you might have hoped for, it was so joyously superior in caliber and character to the representational model of thin governance that prevails on Capitol Hill. Our society is organized to minimize the time that people have available for open-sided, face-to-face meetings, while it glorifies the regular intervals set aside for watching three-hour sporting events.

Less visible, but even more labor-intensive, were the endless meetings entailed by membership in any of the working groups in Occupy. Those on the way to burnout could always cite Oscar Wilde: “The trouble with socialism is that it takes too many evenings.” Certainly, the demands of my profession and my duties to two young children cut deeply into my own participation. But I stuck out the winter and the spring in an effort to keep up with the core OWS group of about two hundred. By mid-summer, the work of the Occupy Student Debt campaign, which I helped to organize, had become more central to OWS as a whole. Debt had always been a master-theme of Occupy. But it took a while to figure out that if this was a political movement (as opposed to a social movement, which typically makes demands on the state for recognition), then its raw material was the dilemma of being knee-deep in debt—the most chronic, if not universal, condition of the 99%.

Of course, socialism itself, to take Wilde’s quip literally, was never in question. If anything, Occupy has been anarchism in action from day one. For anarchists, group assembly and direct action are not means to some end that is then adopted as policy and legislated. Meetings and actions—where people practice the art of being autonomous and mutually supportive at one and the same time—*are* the product. To ensure that these spaces are safe, there are

many protocols to follow, even when the police attack. Seeking out confrontation with the police may be an adventurist act for some thrill-seekers, but for most it is a necessary showdown with the unacceptably violent and illegitimate authority of the state.

Like many of my generation, I have always been comfortable with drawing on multiple political traditions as opposed to a single ideological standpoint. In my case: democratic socialist by birthright; Marxist, feminist, pro-queer, and anti-racist by analytic training; and anarchist by inclination. Occupy had room for everyone, but the overall tacit agreement was to play by the rules of anarchist conduct. To behave like free people actually takes a good deal of training and discipline, and so the playbook is a lot different from the anti-authority counterculture that I was weaned on. The mind-set of youth politics today is, as always, an amalgam of the ideas, tactics, and ideologies of the past, but it seems clear that anarchist principles have become the primary glue for binding them all into a more or less coherent mentality. The anti-WTO protest in Seattle in 1999 is often cited as the “coming-out party” for the horizontal anarchist mode, after which it went global. Occupy and its immediate antecedents, such as the Spanish *indignados*, have been more like the graduation ceremonies.

Can horizontalism establish a firm foothold in the institutions of civil society? Not anytime soon, but, from my experience, it is now a firmly embedded generational style, and will work its way, willy-nilly, into the conduct of the future. If this is what democracy should look like, then the Washington–Wall Street axis is something we should call by another name.

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