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## The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street\*

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*ABSTRACT:* The Occupy Wall Street movement arose to protest extreme economic inequality, corporate control of economic and political life, and government policies which exacerbated them. Many activists held anarchist principles, though not primarily directed at the abolition of the state but rather at the organization of the movement itself: horizontalism (no formal leadership), prefiguration (attempting to model the desired future society in the movement's own practice), autonomy from the state and other political organizations, mutual aid, and defiance of government authority. The mainly young occupiers were attracted to anarchism because neither employment in large institutions nor a government safety net appeared to offer them any prospect of security, so they invested their faith in autonomous solidary organizations governed by consensus. Though Occupy Wall Street deliberately abstained from conventional political activism, it nevertheless influenced that process by focusing political discourse on inequality, opening up political space for other actors to press for reforms.

**T**HE OCCUPY WALL STREET MOVEMENT (OWS) erupted on September 17, 2011, to occupy, not Wall Street itself, but nearby Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan. Inspired by the Arab Spring and protests in Spain, Greece, and Wisconsin, a small band of hardy protesters moved into the park, set up camp, and remained for two months. OWS protested the extreme inequality of wealth and its exacerbation by government financial policies such as the 2008 bailout of the banks and the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision (2010)

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that allowed unlimited corporate political campaign donations. With the slogan “We are the 99%” it drew attention to the vast gulf between the wealthy few and the struggling majority.

The protest was not just about the corporations or economic inequality, however. Occupiers aspired to transform social values to favor human relations over financial transactions. In Zuccotti Park they proposed to organize a community on their own terms.

This dynamic movement spread from New York to hundreds of towns and cities across the United States and abroad. Observers did not know what to make of it. One feature stood out in many accounts: it was labeled “anarchist.” It seemed to warrant the label in its claim to leaderlessness, its rejection of conventional political engagement, and a magnetism that attracted police bearing nightsticks, handcuffs, and pepper spray.

Occupy Wall Street can be characterized as anarchist, but in a very complicated sense. The movement quickly attracted the whole spectrum of the left, from liberal Democrats to revolutionary communists, and a few right-wing libertarians. There were many who had anarchistic ideas, but they did not necessarily call themselves anarchists. Some rejected all political labels; others thought “anarchist” implied political positions that they rejected. And the movement had no central authority to dictate any political line.

Still it was anarchist in spirit and sensibility; anarchists (whether declared or not) set the tone. This anarchism consisted far less in concrete aspirations to a future society free of coercion, or in any political strategy, than in everyday organization and interpersonal relations. It claimed to be leaderless, governed by consensus, and it attempted to meet the needs of occupiers internally and cooperatively.

In examining the anarchism of the Occupy Wall Street movement, I will first give a brief account of the occupation. Next I will discuss the meaning of the term “anarchism” in history and in the minds of some occupiers; while those who called themselves anarchists or self-consciously embraced anarchist principles were not a majority, many occupiers had a strong affinity for anarchist ideas and practices, constituting a sensibility that characterized the movement as a whole. Third, I will discuss five tenets of anarchism, showing how they were applied in OWS. I will then consider the sources of the attraction of anarchist ideas and practices for a broad segment of the left, especially among the young, in the United States today. Finally I will discuss

how these ideas and practices and this broad sensibility affected the political outcomes of the movement.

*Life in Zuccotti Park*<sup>1</sup>

In its July 2011 issue, the Canadian anticonsumer magazine *Adbusters* published a call to occupy Wall Street. Citing Tahrir Square in Cairo as its inspiration and filling a two-page spread, it read (in its entirety):

#OCCUPYWALLSTREET

Are you ready for a Tahrir moment?

On Sept. 17, flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street.

Groups of people started meeting in New York during the summer to lay plans. Responding to the *Adbusters* call, some political groups already involved in anti-Wall Street protests called a general assembly for August 2 at the statue of the bull near Wall Street. The main organizers came from the sectarian party Workers World, but many who were disaffected by the domineering and scripted conduct of the meeting split off to gather separately in a nearby park. This small group met and grew through August and September to plan the action and prepare logistical support.

Many of these initial organizers were self-conscious anarchists — notably, David Graeber, already well known as a theorist of a revived anarchist movement (Graeber, 2004; 2009), who was to become the Occupy movement's chief ideologue, and Marisa Holmes, who became an important apostle of anarchist practices in the movement. They proposed that the meetings be run by the consensus process that was derived from Quaker practice and had become common in anarchist circles in the antiglobalization movement. According to Holmes,<sup>2</sup> a

- 1 General accounts of the occupation can be found in Bray, 2013; Graeber, 2012; Schneider, 2013; and Gitlin, 2012. The first three are written from an anarchist perspective by authors who were deeply involved in the movement; the fourth is from the perspective of an engaged outsider.
- 2 Quotations without bibliographic reference are from interviews. With their permission, I have identified interview subjects by their real names. There is one exception; I identify one person by a pseudonym, but it is the name by which the person was known to other occupiers.

“process group” of “people who had a lot of experience with process either as part of the alterglobalization movement or had been trained by those people” was formed at the first assembly. Decisions would be based on consensus rather than majority rule. “We wanted to create a set of practices that are anarchistic and popularize them.” The most important practices were “direct democracy, self-management, self-organization, trying to create egalitarian social relations.”

For two months Zuccotti Park became a space for living where the occupiers created a communal life embodying the principles that underlay their practice: without formal leaders, everyone would have equal standing and the occupation itself would model the future society to which they aspired. This aspiration found direct expression in the occupation’s organization, from the processes for reaching consensus in meetings to the provision of food, medical care, and security. Though these practices can also be found in other movements and organizations, occupiers identified them with anarchism.

Organizing several hundred people on a site required work. Working groups managed logistics: keeping the place clean, receiving and distributing donations of food and supplies, providing medical care. Many who were homeless or poor showed up asking for help, and they were provided for. (They were also incorporated into the occupation’s activities. Some caused problems; others made important contributions.) Others prepared the almost daily marches or chatted up the local merchants who allowed the people camping out to use their facilities.

They engaged in constant political discussion. Full-time occupiers and others who just dropped in intensely debated political issues, personal troubles, the structure of the economy and the political system, and the future; they found these conversations energizing and liberating. Anyone on the occupation site in New York, occupier or visitor, could feel the pulsating, vibrant energy. Groups formed and dissolved, switching back and forth from concrete tasks to deliberation and discussion. The General Assembly met daily to make decisions in which all could participate. On September 29 a general assembly adopted a Declaration of the Occupation of New York City (the only authoritative statement of OWS’ platform) presenting a catalog of grievances against corporations. In language that echoed the Declaration of Independence, it accused them of exploitation, inequality, discrimination, destruction of the environment, and a wide-ranging bill of offenses (Declaration, 2011).

Some organized to address the outside world in political mobilization and in media of communication. Many occupiers came from or aspired to careers in writing, the arts, the media, and information technology. Now they applied their talents to broadcasting their message in word and image, through old and new media, in a spectacular outpouring of creativity. They attracted the attention of national and international media. The slogan “We are the 99%” drew attention to the gulf separating the mass of the population from the few who ran the country and controlled its economy. The idea of the 99% rapidly took hold in public consciousness and stimulated mounting public attention to economic inequality in the supposed land of opportunity.

### *Defining Anarchism*

In general anarchists eschew doctrine and emphasize practice, so it is hard to find any authoritative definition. Broadly, anarchism holds that relations among people should be governed by voluntary association, freely chosen. No one should exercise authority over others, and relations should be defined by agreements reached consensually.

Classical anarchism rejected entanglement with any formal state institutions, which were regarded as necessarily coercive. Most anarchists were also anticapitalist, and saw capitalism as a major source of evils in contemporary society, but they also believed that any state institutions were necessarily coercive regardless of their economic underpinnings. In the late 19th century European workers’ movement, anarchists and Marxists looked to the eventual abolition of the state; unlike anarchists, however, Marxists believed that to that end workers must first appropriate the state and exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat. Anarchists argued that such coercion violated their principles (Avrich, 1970; Graeber, 2009; Guerin, 1970; Joll, 1980; Romanos, 2013).

Anarchists wanted to do away with the state not only because they rejected coercion. They also believed in the philosophical principle that means and ends are inseparable; the means used to achieve any end must be consistent with that end (Franks, 2003; 2008; Graeber, 2009, 210). They refused any pragmatic use of means that might pollute the process so that the end would be itself contaminated. This principle has been called prefiguration. A prefigurative movement tries to create, within the movement itself, social relations without

alienation or exploitation, anticipating (or “prefiguring”) the social relations of the new society that the movement hopes to create.<sup>3</sup>

The anarchism of Occupy Wall Street was not particularly concerned with questions of state form. It was an antidogmatic version that Graeber calls “small-a anarchism” (2013, 89, 192). Rather than envision a specific political future, it prescribes a set of practices within the movement itself that activists believed embodied the ideal of the future they wished to create. Nevertheless, as I will show, the issue of pragmatism and political action aroused implicit controversy in the movement.

OWS drew on a history of movement activism from which it inherited the ideas and practices that I call anarchist. I refer to “ideas and practices” simultaneously because they are both. In the 1960s, the early civil rights movement, younger members of the second-wave women’s movement, and SDS were oriented toward participatory democracy. These impulses converged with practices coming from the Quakers and the Movement for a New Society, which promoted the idea of consensus-based movement organization in the 1970s and 1980s. The same practices were largely adopted by the movement of direct action against nuclear power. These earlier movements, however, far from being anarchist, were enmeshed with the state and strove for practical political reform (Cornell, 2009; Epstein, 2001; Polletta, 2002).

Anarchism by that name began to gain currency in the antinuclear movement of the 1970s and 1980s and, even more, in the antiglobalization or global justice movement beginning in the 1990s. A broad coalition was behind the anti-WTO actions in Seattle in 1999, but groups with anarchist leanings got most of the attention. They followed anarchist principles of organization, and some of them smashed some windows in the “Battle of Seattle.” In the 21st century, the antiglobalization movement blockaded several international summit meetings, in the process introducing cadres of young people to anarchism

3 The term prefiguration was coined by Carl Boggs (Boggs, personal communication) to characterize revolutionary movements in Russia, Italy, Spain, and the U. S. New Left (Boggs, 1977). It was applied by Sheila Rowbotham (1979) to the women’s movement of the 1970s; by Wini Breines (1980; 1989) to the U. S. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and by myself to the Portuguese Revolution (Hammond, 1984; 1988). In none of these cases was it identified with anarchism, though it clearly evokes a concept proposed by anarchists around the turn of the 20th century (cf. Franks, 2003; 2008; Romanos, 2013). It has been used more widely in the present century, especially in relation to participatory democracy movements that in some ways anticipate the politics of OWS (Polletta, 2002; Hammond, 2012a; Sitrin, 2006).

(Epstein, 1991; 2001; Flesher Fominaya, 2007; Graeber, 2009; 2012b; 2013; Hammond, 2012a, 224–29; Juris, 2009; Sitrin, 2006, 3–5). These movements contained the germ of horizontalism and consensus that became the hallmark of OWS.

### *Occupy's Anarchism*

I identify five fundamental tenets of anarchism that I argue were prevalent in OWS. These tenets not only were cognitively accepted by many occupiers but also guided their behavior. The movement put them into practice even when not all activists subscribed to them explicitly. I have reconstructed them from interviews, documents, and observation.<sup>4</sup> They were ideals, and far from perfectly realized; the actions of individuals and of the movement as a whole departed significantly from them. My purpose, however, is not to criticize the shortfalls but rather to describe the ideals underlying the movement.

Like all social movements, Occupy Wall Street's membership was diffuse and fluid, with varying levels of participation. I see anarchism as the fundamental orientation of the movement because it prevailed among the most active. Gitlin (2012, 206) describes the "inner" and the "outer" movement; Mark Bray (2013, 3–4) surveyed 192 people he describes as core organizers of the occupation and constituting "the vast majority of those that made Occupy Wall Street happen." (He is not precise about his selection criteria; his claim is based mainly on his own experience as one of the core organizers.) He found that 39% considered themselves anarchists, and another 33% held anarchist ideas without embracing the label.

There were many less active participants whose primary political commitments were elsewhere. I argue (with Bray), however, that the tone of the occupation was set by its core organizers, in particular by those who were in earliest, many of whom promoted anarchist practices in the general assemblies before September 17. Those who were less involved or sympathized from outside did not have a distinct impact on either the practice or the course of the movement.

Occupy's anarchism meant focusing attention on the movement and occupation as an entity, more than on effecting the social

4 This analysis is specifically of the occupation of "Wall Street" (actually, Zuccotti Park) in New York; these anarchistic tenets held to varying degrees in other occupations.

transformations to which people endorsing these principles aspired. This is not to say that activists consciously chose to put building a movement ahead of effecting social change. Some did, some didn't. But in combination these tenets produced an organizational logic that led to discounting the practicality of actions to achieve those goals and to focusing on the movement as an experience.

I identify five tenets:

- Horizontalism/consensus
- Prefiguration
- Autonomy
- Mutual aid
- Defiance

### 1. *Horizontalism/Consensus*

[The] liberty of each individual . . . far from halting as at a boundary before the liberty of others, finds there its confirmation and its extension to infinity; the illimitable liberty of each through the liberty of all, liberty by solidarity, liberty in equality.

— Michael Bakunin (1950, 17.)

A horizontal movement is one with no permanent leadership; everyone has equal standing (Sitrin, 2006, 3–4). Occupy was decentralized and took pride in being leaderless (or, as some preferred, “leaderful,” calling everyone a leader). Horizontalism was manifest in the inclusiveness of the occupation; everyone was welcome. Anyone could join in the daily general assemblies and share in decision-making. Procedures for meetings attempted to institutionalize the consensus process adopted from earlier movements influenced by anarchism, especially the global justice movement. They were meant to assure equal participation and prevent some people from dominating. Among them are the stack, the people’s microphone, and hand signals. The stack is the list of people who asked to be recognized to speak. Sometimes it was a “progressive stack,” bumping people ahead because, as women or members of minority groups, they were often marginalized.

In large assemblies, people communicated via the “people’s microphone.” Bullhorns are prohibited in New York City without a police permit, and occupiers declined to apply for permits. Someone



addressing a mass meeting would pause after each phrase and the people nearby would repeat it in unison to the crowd. The people's mic can give the speaker a sense of power, and for those playing the role of the mic amplifying a speaker's voice, the call and response is physically energizing and provides a strong sense of participation. If the people's mic was initially adopted as a form of resistance against the regulation of their right to speak, it became a source of joy, sometimes used even in a small group that could hear perfectly well.

Hand signals were adopted to minimize some predictable delays in an open meeting, but came to be identified as the main operationalization of consensus process: "Twinkles," raising one or both hands and wiggling fingers — fingers pointing straight up signify assent, fingers pointing down signify disagreement, fingers pointing forward register neutrality or ambivalence; a triangle formed by the fingers to signal a point of process; crossed arms in front of the body to impose a "block" — the blocker was so strongly opposed to a proposal that he or she was willing to deny a consensus, which meant that no action could be taken.

These procedures were meant to facilitate reaching agreement through discussion, giving everyone, in theory, an equal role in decisions, and preventing the accumulation of power by leaders. According to Dale Luce: "We [were] trying to exercise our democratic muscle here in the park. . . . That was the main thrust; we needed to live in a more horizontal, participatory society." When the New York occupation sent emissaries to occupations around the country to train them in how to occupy, consensus process was a major lesson. But the procedures sometimes took on a ritual quality, outweighing the goal of reaching agreement.

Pursuing consensus often brought problems, as Shawn Carrié acknowledged: "That is what democracy is: messy, slow, it's a necessary quality. Dictatorship is very clear. You can make decisions very quickly, without much discussion. Its opposite is going to take time, it's going to be messy. . . . Democracy is the rule of many."

The public relations working group, formed to orient journalists, was impatient with those who were always trying to find "the leaders" of Occupy Wall Street. According to Mark Bray of the PR group, "the media was eager to key in on one or two individuals not only because it fits their understanding of hierarchy but also makes their

job a lot easier. They are lazy. They show up at noon and want to be out at one. Depending on how you look at it, we have no leaders or we are all leaders.”

Leaderlessness was also expressed in skill sharing in day-to-day activities. People who were skilled and experienced trained others, whether in screenprinting, video production, or meeting facilitation itself. According to Rebecca Manski (n.d.), “OWS’ aim is to create a space for the emergence of as-yet-unactivated individuals to discover their leadership capacity.” She added in an interview: “Everyone is needed, everyone has something to offer. . . . It is a culture that believes in mistakes and learning from mistakes, maybe making them again, embracing mistakes, not necessarily presenting polished final decisions or final images for public consumption.”

Katie Davison, who produced videos in the occupation — most notably, instances of police brutality filmed during demonstrations — contrasted the pleasure of working on an egalitarian basis in “this leaderless, horizontal movement” to the rigid hierarchy that she experienced in professional film production. “I am hoping that this value system will resonate more; I don’t know if human nature wants us to centralize.”

The desire to include everyone sometimes created problems. Free food and shelter in tents in Zuccotti Park attracted homeless people (rumor had it that police around the city directed them there). Anarchists’ sympathy for underdogs meant tolerating their idiosyncrasies because they were perceived as the most oppressed in society. Many homeless people were integrated and took up tasks as members of working groups; others acted out their problems, causing difficulties that had to be dealt with (as discussed more below).

While the claim of “leaderlessness” was sometimes enunciated defensively, to deny that anyone exercised leadership, many occupiers recognized that there were leaders but emphasized that no one had a permanent leadership position or authority to give orders to anyone else, and that many developed leadership skills during the occupation. As José Alcoff said: “One of the biggest central themes is the idea of self-organization. You don’t have outside leadership. Things are self-organized, self-directed. . . . The principal thing a leader should do is create more leaders. Horizontality is not a fiction, an ideology or a systemic organizational model. It is an aspiration.”

## 2. *Prefiguration*

How could one want an equalitarian and free society to issue from authoritarian organization? It is impossible.

— James Guillaume, a comrade of Bakunin  
(Quoted in Franks, 2003, 22)

A prefigurative movement tries to embody “within the ongoing political practice of a movement . . . those forms of social relations, decisionmaking, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (Boggs, 1977, 100). Prefiguration means “building the new society in the shell of the old” (Graeber, 2013, 190), first, by modeling the desired social relations, more fulfilling and less estranged than those typical of alienated capitalist society; second, by making the means consistent with the end, as Guillaume indicates in the epigraph to this section.

One unanticipated outcome of the occupation was the creation of a vibrant community. Feelings of solidarity and community are an important part of the motive for participation in social movements. This is not to say that community is always achieved, especially in the contentious atmosphere frequently found in left movements in the United States. Nevertheless, because participation is voluntary, it must be enjoyable; so participants look for good social relations. According to Amin Husain, “We need love. We need warmth. In the park, people gave hugs, they didn’t shake hands. I don’t mean that in a sentimental way.”

For Leah Feder, “what attracted me about Occupy Wall Street was the utopian dimension, trying to model an alternative way of living.” David Graeber amplifies: “Zuccotti Park, and all subsequent encampments, became spaces of experiment with creating the institutions of a new society . . . operating on anarchist principles of mutual aid and self-organization” (2011).

Closely related to the ideal of community in prefigurative social movements is that of participatory democracy. The slogan and the practice of participatory democracy were inherited from movements of the 1960s (Epstein, 1991; Polletta, 2002). But in Occupy more than in these earlier movements, community building and acting out their vision tended to take on as much importance as the political goals.

One aspect of prefiguration already mentioned was the collaboration that cultivated people's capacities. Occupiers welcomed newcomers to take a leading role in the activities of working groups; the more experienced shared their skills with the novices. According to Michael Fix of the video production team, people developed skills rapidly. "What was beautiful about Occupy: if you made yourself available, you stepped up and offered, within two or three days you are the go-to person."

A prefigurative institution that gestated in the occupation was self-managed worker cooperatives. Dale Luce participated in discussions about "the role that worker cooperatives might play in New York, solving some of the issues that Occupy Wall Street tried to bring to the attention of the public. It can help to build a more democratic, horizontal world." Luce went on to be co-founder of Occucopy (later Radix Media), a worker-controlled copy shop.

### *3. Autonomy*

Direct Action . . . is a matter of proceeding as if the existing structure of power did not exist.

— David Graeber (2013, 233)

A third tenet was autonomy. People in Occupy Wall Street should (primarily) act on their own to achieve their goals, without reference to the world outside — in particular, without reference to authority and the forces of order. The entire project of the occupation was a statement of independence from existing authority structures.

Their autonomy brought forth many creative endeavors. The movement created its own media to counter the bias and transcend the rigidity of the mainstream media. A polyphonic and creative outburst emerged in word and image, in print, in visual arts, and online. Social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, became critical channels for sharing information about fast-breaking activities. Several groups (formally recognized working groups and others) produced artwork and performances. Video producers documented the occupation and posted their productions, as well as creative endeavors in music and humorous video segments, to YouTube. All these endeavors were meant as alternatives to the content, style, and production practices of the mainstream media.

Some computer and information technologists formed the Technical Operations working group. TechOps (and sister committees in occupations around the country) worked to free the movement (and the public) from dependence on big technology corporations, especially in two areas: live streaming and free software. Live streaming — capturing events and broadcasting them, live and unedited, to the internet — was a new technology to which the Global Revolution group contributed important technical innovations.

The free software movement long antedates Occupy, but many who were attracted to its principles were also attracted to Occupy's anarchistic spirit. Free Libre Open Source (FLOS) software is intended both to return the means of production to the user and to skirt the cost and restrictiveness of the giant software monopolies. Devin Balkind valued independent technology “more than simply [to] provide the Occupy movement with useful tools, but to provide a FLO alternative to the world's largest web application provider: Google” (Balkind, 2013). Drew Hornbein reinforced the resistance to corporate dominance: “Google, and Twitter, and Facebook . . . offer free services because they view you as a product. You pay for the product by handing over your information that you send over their networks.”

Occupy protected its independence fiercely, determined to resist cooptation. Hand-painted signs that marchers carried in demonstrations were a small but telling symbol of that independence. Instead of carrying the preprinted signs often seen in demonstrations, supplied by formal organizations (such as unions and political groups) that dictate the permitted slogans, occupiers painted their own slogans on cardboard. These signs offered an opportunity for creativity, and many showed a touch of humor.<sup>5</sup> They created an atmosphere very different from one dominated by uniform printed signs. By exercising individual creativity, protesters rejected subservience to a hierarchical organization.

Occupiers refused to engage in electoral politics, even though many friendly critics hoped that they would mobilize behind the Obama campaign and influence the election as the Tea Party had done in 2010. Bill Moyers, interviewing two occupiers, urged them to seek out allies among established politicians as the civil rights movement

<sup>5</sup> A sampling can be seen at <http://www.damncoolpictures.com/2011/10/best-signs-from-occupy-wall-street.html>

had done. Amin Husain responded: “Martin Luther King didn’t go to LBJ; he said, ‘I have a dream.’ The people in Liberty Square have a dream: no war, no oppression, no patriarchy, justice, fairness, equality. I want to hear a dream articulated that has these things in it” (Moyers, 2012). Or, as Nathan Schneider put it, they saw politics as “not a matter of choosing among what was offered but of fighting for what we actually need” (2013, 77).

They were also impatient with traditional approaches to political action on the left. Matt Presto attended the general assemblies before the occupation, hoping that “it would be a refreshing approach to politics in New York City that had been dominated by the traditional day of action approach: get a permit, march down the street, then everybody goes home” (Holmes and Presto, 2012).

The Statement of Autonomy (2011), adopted by the New York City General Assembly on November 10, 2011, emphasized independence from existing political forces and from the demands of compromise for the sake of political expediency. Just as prefiguration meant using means consistent with their ends, and not descending to compromise, autonomy meant making alliances with other political groups only on Occupy’s own terms. Some sneered at the “NGO–industrial complex,” though sympathetic observers and even other occupiers thought they displayed a virtually paranoid fear of co-optation.

Autonomy meant refusing to make specific demands, declining large donations from celebrities, and not negotiating with police over permits for demonstrations or for permission to stay in the park. Some occupiers who wanted Occupy to endorse a platform of demands created a Demands Working Group. Its proposal was rejected by the General Assembly. Most occupiers refused even to formulate demands on principle, because to make demands was already to conform to the mainstream agenda, and any fixed set of demands would be intrinsically reformist (Bray, 2013, 27–28, 104–106; Graeber, 2013, 87–89).

Some outsiders offered large donations of money to OWS but many occupiers were suspicious of becoming beholden to them. After the occupation was evicted, Ben Cohen of Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream offered to fund major projects through a proposed tax-exempt foundation, reserving for himself a leading role in deciding who would get the money. Marisa Holmes criticized the would-be donor as well as those who wanted to take his money: “They do not understand a leaderless, horizontal movement. They are creating a nonprofit and

hiring people away from Occupy with salary or as freelance.” Some occupiers nevertheless took advantage of Cohen’s largesse; others raised money for projects through Kickstarter or other means independent of the General Assembly. (OWS also received a large amount of money in small donations which were not seen as compromising, but its disposition also caused disputes, as I discuss below.)

A key decision made at one of the first general assemblies, before the occupation, was to have no contact with the police. Many felt that negotiating with the police over permits for actions and locations meant accepting unreasonable restrictions — and the police often repressed them violently anyway. If they did not negotiate or apply for permits, they preserved the possibility of surprise and remained free to engage in action on the boundaries of legality.

#### 4. *Mutual Aid*

In the ethical progress of man, mutual support — not mutual struggle — has had the leading part.

— Petr Kropotkin (1955, 300)

The tenets of Occupy’s anarchism overlap, in both the ideas and the practices that embody them, as we have already seen. The complement of autonomy is mutual aid: for those who refuse to rely on the large institutions of government and corporation and insist on their independence, the alternative is a DIY (Do It Yourself) ethos. But not an individualistic ethos; it relies on a community of like-minded people. Finding a mode of reciprocal caring was also an expression of the desire to prefigure a future society.

Occupy Wall Street was a protest against the power of money in political life but also in everyday life, and against the commodification of care for so many needs that were once met within solidary groups (Graeber, 2013). David Graeber’s book *Debt* (2012a), written before the occupation, is both an analysis of the many ways in which support, caring, and relationships become commodified in contemporary life and a cry of protest.

Mutual aid was modeled in the park by working groups created to meet both the material and nonmaterial needs of the occupiers: the kitchen (dispensing donated food, since cooking was banned), the medical team, sanitation, comfort (distributing donated tents

and sleeping bags), and the People's Library. There was a jail support group for those arrested, and to welcome them when they emerged. In the crisis working group, social service and mental health professionals counseled people who showed signs of mental distress. Many social service professionals, too used to seeing their generous impulses transformed into transactions, enjoyed practicing their professions in OWS without bureaucratic and financial exigencies.

According to Shawn Carrié, the occupation constituted an “autonomous zone [that] had a miniature apparatus of state: food, shelter, communications media, assemblies where the body politic comes together to determine our collective existence and engage in the politics of community — all the infrastructural components of society. That is a demonstration of what is possible if we think about the world in a different way, free from the domination of capitalist power and state power.”

Two aspects of providing mutual aid nevertheless caused controversy: the management of money and the dilemma that mutual aid might devolve into one-sided service provision. The General Assembly had a Paypal account and received tax-deductible donations through a fiscal sponsor, and over seven hundred thousand dollars poured in. According to Marisa Holmes, “it was sort of an accident that we even had this money. . . . for day S17 [September 17, the occupation], maybe a few days after . . . we bought giant jugs of peanut butter and bagels. . . . We wanted to emphasize in-kind donations and try to have a principle of mutual aid. If that wasn't possible we were okay with dealing with some money but we didn't have mechanisms for dealing with money. That was irresponsible” (Holmes and Presto, 2012).

Without much of a plan either for maintaining the funds or for disbursing them, the GA doled out the money in response to proposals presented by working groups. As Holmes wrote later, “The General Assembly was becoming a bureaucratic, money-allocating machine of the mob. This was completely counter to its original intention” (2012, 155).

How occupiers should practice mutual aid also raised issues. Matt Presto recognized that caring did not have the prestige or attraction of militant confrontation with authorities. “What is characterized as real struggle is the most militant kind of struggle; what is devalued is the areas of care. Jail support is not glamorized, not sexy, not like taking to the streets. It's also very gendered: jail support was mostly women” (Holmes and Presto, 2012).



The problem was not only that mutual aid was not glamorous; it could also cease to be mutual, devolving instead into giveaways to people who did not understand it as part of a political project. Especially after the eviction from Zuccotti Park, some occupiers who had been living on the streets or had abandoned homes in other cities to join the occupation were now homeless, and other occupiers felt responsible for them. Some received handouts of money; some were put up in friendly churches or on other occupiers' couches.

The relation of mutual aid to political practice came more into question in 2012, after the occupation was over, with two projects, Strike Debt and Occupy Sandy. Strike Debt raised money for a "Rolling Jubilee," buying up medical debt at a fraction of its value and then telling the debtors that it was canceled. After Hurricane Sandy hit in October 2012 (the worst hurricane on record in New York) and left thousands homeless or trapped in homes without electricity and with no way to care for themselves, Occupy Sandy recruited tens of thousands of volunteers. Both the Rolling Jubilee and Occupy Sandy were intended as "mutual aid as direct action," but some in the movement questioned whether providing relief, however necessary in an emergency, was really an appropriate political project. Recipients often did not see it politically. Some Occupy Sandy volunteers came into conflict with the communities where they were working; others were accused (by other volunteers) of seeking personal reward through jobs or consulting contracts.

### 5. *Defiance*

Simply ordinary people turned this government [out] by writing articles, holding speeches, nois[y] demonstrations, bonfires, car horns, direct action, civil disobedience and sabotage.  
— Aftaka, Icelandic anarchist collective, January 2009

Direct action is an important part of the anarchist tradition. Understood broadly, it means any action in which people aim to resolve their problems directly rather than relying on others, in particular on the state. Sometimes direct action was interpreted broadly in OWS. Marisa Holmes said: "Disrupting, blockading, just like organizing food is a form of direct action." Matt Presto went further: direct action means "refusing to pay taxes, sabotage, striking, and boycotting" (Holmes and Presto, 2012).

But direct action took on a more specific meaning, of militant street protests (Graeber, 2009, 203–204). Defiance means more than autonomy, both in principle and in practice. Autonomy suggests withdrawal and ignoring official institutions; defiance means confronting and exposing them. This defiance came to be embodied in the Direct Action Working Group (DA), which organized almost daily marches on Wall Street and bigger marches recruiting supporters citywide. Eventually DA was authorized by the general assembly to approve of actions on its behalf: a subgroup would organize an action and ask DA for its sanction.

These actions led to regular confrontations with the police. They were often deliberately provocative, creating situations where an excessive police response was predictable (if not justified). The standard procedure in the New York Police Department (NYPD) for dealing with protest involves impeding protesters from assembling and moving freely and responding with violence when they do (Vitale, 2005, 283). This police behavior goads protesters into challenging them. OWS in turn invited confrontation by refusing to negotiate with the police or seek permits for their actions. Pepper-spraying, violent arrests, and other incidents of police abuse drew the attention of the media and aroused public sympathy for the protesters.

Conflict between occupiers and the police took a different form on the occupation site than in marches in the streets. The peculiar legal status of Zuccotti Park as a privately owned public space (Hammond, 2013, 514) meant that the police did not have the same authority as over public streets and sidewalks, so their response was more restrained and less consistent. Nevertheless, the police twice prepared to evict protesters. The first time, in response to Mayor Michael Bloomberg's announcement that the police would clear the park on October 14, thousands of OWS supporters showed up at six o'clock in the morning to defend it. In the face of the large crowd, the police called off the eviction. On November 15, a month later, however, the police returned, this time unannounced, invaded the park in the middle of the night, and dragged the occupiers out. An exhaustive study by a Fordham–NYU Law Schools team documented 130 incidents of "aggressive and excessive police use of force," including bodily force, weapons, and restraint of detained persons throughout the occupation (Knuckey, *et al.*, 2012, 72).

Occupiers forged a culture that took pride in confronting the police and being arrested. Acting nonviolently for the most part, they

were eager to expose the corruption and repressiveness of the police and court system, and (perhaps not incidentally) demonstrate their heroic resistance. Collective participation in acts of transgression gives participants a sense of power. It ratifies the belief in their rights, the conviction that those rights are being trampled on, and the determination to assert them. Arrest and the subsequent proceedings confirmed for them the repressive nature of the society that they were protesting. Shawn Carrié described his arrest as “liberating.” He continued: “Some people have said it almost got too glorified to be arrested. . . . Being arrested is an incredibly dehumanizing process; but with other people, with your head held high, it is a very empowering experience.”

OWS benefited enormously in public perception from the police repression. But, as I have argued elsewhere (Hammond, 2013, 518–19), relying on confrontation with authorities to generate sympathy can distract attention from the larger goals of social justice and make treatment of protesters by police an issue rather than police abuse in the context of structural abuses engendered by the capitalist system, focusing on the oppression of the occupiers rather than the everyday police abuse of minorities and the poor.

These five tenets constitute a reconstruction of the anarchism that I have inferred among the occupiers. Two other issues closely related to the core values of anarchism led to conflicts that were never resolved within the movement: anti-oppression and nonviolence. Everyone paid lip service to combating racism and patriarchy. But the most visible activists were white men. The marginalization of women and people of color brought conflict at several points. A draft of the Declaration of the Occupation was challenged in September by feminists and people of color because it spoke of groups “formerly divided,” implying that divisions had been overcome. The phrase was deleted, but the issue arose throughout the occupation and beyond (Bray, 2013, 94–96; Schneider, 2013; Maharawal, 2011; 2012).

Anarchists have long debated both the definition of violence and its permissibility as a political tactic (Graeber, 2009, 212). The same debates arose in OWS. Nonviolence was endorsed as a principle in the General Assembly’s Statement of Autonomy. But some called for “diversity of tactics,” implying that violent actions, however defined, were acceptable under some conditions. This issue too remained contentious, especially after some marchers in an Occupy Oakland demonstration broke some windows in the winter. The New York

occupiers tended toward nonviolence, but the debate continued (Bray, 2013, 209–47; Epstein, 2012).

*The Social Bases of Occupy's Anarchism*

OWS' anarchism is consistent with the social and generational experience of many occupiers. Though the movement hoped that the vast majority of the population would identify with an undifferentiated 99%, most activists came from a particular segment, whose growth itself reflected the polarization of the economy. The growing inequality of wealth and income that consigns many to working harder and for longer hours but for stagnating wages has also spawned a growing "precariat," a class of people, mostly young and many well educated, without stable employment.

Many young people in the United States have experienced sporadic employment or long-term unemployment, despite educational credentials acquired at great cost. Many assumed a crushing personal debt load (Hammond, 2012b; Milkman, 2012). In their chosen fields, such as media, information technology, and higher education, work is increasingly available only for a short term or on a part-time or freelance basis. Other young people, with little education and few skills, found low-end service jobs with poverty wages and no security. Some of them abandoned the labor market or never ventured into it, but dropped out definitively. Some came to the occupation in New York from elsewhere after quitting jobs or enduring lengthy spells of unemployment. After the eviction they turned to couchsurfing, hanging out with friends and living off the land. Young people have often been the main recruits to social movements — today more than in ordinary times, because economic crisis has swelled their numbers and magnified their grievances.

Members of previous generations expected to find stable, reasonably well paid employment with security, and many actually succeeded. They relied either on unions or on secure employment in large institutions to assure their future; they counted on government to protect these institutions. Leftists of that earlier generation gravitated to socialism or at least to the welfare state. Though opposed to the capitalist economy and the capitalist state, they envisioned a socialist system lodged in big, institutionalized government and big, institutionalized workplaces (freed of the capitalist taint).

Younger people today have no such expectation. Downsizing has become epidemic in capitalist firms. Unions no longer guarantee a living wage or job security. Precarious employment is common, and many, newly entering the labor force, have never known the stable employment of the past. Family living standards have stagnated and unemployment is an imminent threat to many. Both major parties were complicit in the transformation that severed the safety net, undermined unions, and put the political system at the service of the rich.

Today's young workers, with little expectation of prosperity through employment or social protection, envision meeting their needs independent of state support, through solidary groups and autonomous organizations. Their experience informs their vision of social transformation. They reject the materialist values that their formerly expected security supported. They want to avoid entanglements with bureaucratic organizations, the corporation, the state, and the labor union. Anarchism rather than governmental or private institutions appears to nourish their hopes.

Many occupiers were attracted to anarchist thought, were familiar with anarchist classics, and drew on those classics for the design of what they came to see as a model society in the park. The anarchist model, particularly in its communal aspects, seems particularly appropriate to the life of the precariously employed, just as the bureaucratic trade union was for the factory workers of an earlier generation.

### *How OWS Matters*

The tenets of anarchism determined OWS' political intervention. Specifically, three of these tenets in combination — horizontalism, prefiguration, and autonomy — meant that the movement was more focused on the present than the future and more concerned with its internal organization in the small physical space of Zuccotti Park than with achieving social and economic change. Together they meant that OWS did little to combat the ills of U. S. society directly, even though that was its ostensible purpose.

Practices I have called anarchistic gave the occupation a powerful impact on those who participated. Living out these tenets was an exhilarating experience — and brought many participants into the anarchist fold. But it also left many others out. OWS claimed to represent the 99%, but most people cannot participate in a political activity

of this sort — at a minimum, because of time constraints, but even more because they do not share its underlying political orientation even if they agree on issues. In Gitlin’s phrase, Occupy “thrived on a sense of beautiful marginality” (2012, 149) as it attempted to create extraordinary social relations within an exclusive group.

Many critics chastised the occupy movement for abstaining from practical politics to achieve its announced goals. As mentioned, Bill Moyers urged two occupiers to emulate the civil rights movement. In June 2012 the liberal political comedian Bill Maher called on Occupy to “move off the streets and into the voting booth” (Maher, 2012). Gitlin, who shows some sympathy for the movement’s utopian aspirations, nevertheless criticizes its “process fetishism” and says that its “tactics threatened to overshadow the movement’s ideological thrust” (Gitlin, 2012, 44, 186; 2013, 228).

The movement eschewed what others regard as practical politics, both because of participants’ convictions and because of its organizational logic. To have focused more on immediate political impact would have violated its principles and strained against its style of operation. Those who called on it to take on electoral campaigns or political reform were asking it to be a different movement.

Most participants were attracted to it initially by the platform of opposition to corporate power and economic inequality. They might well have been ready to join a movement oriented more pragmatically to institutional politics if one had been on offer. It is impossible to know how effective such a movement would have been. But it seems inherently unlikely that a more conventional reform-oriented movement would have had the temerity to occupy Wall Street (or nearby) in the first place or would have attracted such a large popular following. And it was the occupation that drew the attention of a fascinated world and made the public, the media, and even the government recognize escalating economic inequality in the U. S. class structure and think about ameliorating it. Practical political efforts to remedy inequality have multiplied enormously since the occupation.

During and after the occupation of Zuccotti Park, discussion of inequality and corporate control exploded in the media. And the political system responded: in the next two years, those issues made significant headway. The Dodd–Frank Act became law. Elizabeth Warren was elected senator from Massachusetts in 2012; Bill de Blasio won the race for mayor of New York and Kshama Sawant for the Seattle

City Council in 2013 on platforms denouncing inequality. Minimum-wage workers in fast food and retail sales have gone on strike to win economic gains. Several states and cities legislated increases in the minimum wage. President Obama (2013) declared inequality “the defining challenge of our time.”

OWS did not mobilize to achieve these changes (although offshoots of Occupy intervened in the regulatory process set in place by the Dodd–Frank Act [dePillis, 2013] and actively supported the fast food workers’ campaign). Instead, Occupy’s effect on the climate of opinion created political space for others, from members of Congress to minimum-wage workers, to act and achieve their goals. OWS opened up the discussion of economic inequality and control of the financial sector, and one could argue that its anarchism was essential to building the movement that achieved that; a more conventional movement seeking political pressure would not have had that impact.

While it is difficult to establish conclusively that a social movement is responsible for a major social change, many observers, including myself, have no hesitation in attributing the change in political discourse to OWS. Journalists unambiguously credit the rising attention to economic inequality in the USA to the Occupy movement, at least one calling it the movement’s “one indisputable triumph” (Kornacki, 2011). Even more tellingly, in 2012, 2013, and 2014 inequality was identified as the top political risk in the world at the World Economic Forum, the annual gathering of the international capitalist class and its political sycophants in Davos, Switzerland. An article in *Business Insider Australia* about its presence in the discussions at the WEF was headlined, “How Occupy Wall Street Won” (Lopez, 2014).

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