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What the Left Can Learn from Occupy Wall Street

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Abstract

The most enduring lesson of Occupy Wall Street is the value of dynamically assembling different tendencies into a multitudinous force. Anarchist leadership was central to launching the movement but contributions from socialists and social democrats were integral to its overall success. Moreover the limitations of anarchist-inspired movement features like horizontalism and refusing demands began to reveal themselves as the encampments advanced, further evidencing the value of dynamic assembly (versus a case for anarchist or socialist universality).

Keywords

Occupy Wall Street, Social Movement Strategy, Anarchism, Socialism, Radicalism and Reform

Introduction

“Whatever happened to the American Left?” asked Michael Kazin in a *New York Times* op-ed in September 2011. After the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent bank bailouts, when surprisingly few protests arose from the Left, Kazin argued that “stern critics of corporate power and government cutbacks have failed to organize a serious movement against the people and politics that bungled the United States into recession.”² But on the exact day of the article’s appearance in the *Times*, activists from the nascent Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement went on a guerilla march.³ Police, caught off-guard, overreacted by fencing in and indiscriminately pepper spraying protesters; a video of the event was

viewed more than a million times on YouTube.⁴ By October, OWS was a media sensation. According to the Pew Research Centre, OWS captured 10 percent of all news reporting in the US during the week of October 10–16.⁵

In impressively short order, OWS moved the public discourse away from debt and austerity and towards the issue of rising income inequality. By October’s end, weekly media uses of the term “income inequality” had increased by a factor of five.⁶ Occupy also succeeded in popularizing a new frame for political struggle: the 1 percent versus the 99 percent. On October 16th, the White House issued a statement claiming that Obama was fighting for the interests of the 99 percent.⁷ For George Gresham, president of SEIU 1199, the largest health care union in the US, OWS “reshaped the national debate as quickly and dramatically as any social movement in American history.”⁸ Paul Krugman called Occupy’s impact on public debate a “miracle.” Former governor of New York, Eliot Spitzer, declared victory for the movement: “Suddenly, the issues of equity, fairness, justice, income distribution, and accountability for the economic cataclysm – issues all but ignored for a generation – are front and center ... until these protests, no political figure or movement had made Americans pay attention to these facts in a meaningful way.”⁹ In two months, a small grassroots movement beginning with fewer than two thousand people had significantly influenced national political discourse in the US. By the time the final eviction was executed on November 15th, encampments had spread to 750 cities worldwide and Occupy’s concerns about growing inequality were firmly planted in public consciousness.¹⁰

Debate about the meaning and significance of OWS is ongoing in activist, academic, and public policy circles. What is OWS’s legacy? Author Thomas Frank

articulates the opinion – prevalent on the Left – that the movement was ineffective at creating meaningful change: “Why did this effort fail? How did OWS blow all the promise of its early days?”¹¹ Consensus is emerging, even among core organizers themselves, that impacts were significantly more limited than participants and supporters would have liked.¹² Many critics argue that OWS failed to create the substantive social change that it advocated.

In this article, we focus on the early days of OWS. We take the rapid shift of national public discourse to be an important accomplishment. In the run-up to the 2012 presidential election, Mitt Romney’s private equity experience became a liability,¹³ and both parties strategically pinned Wall Street connections on their opponents.¹⁴ Occupy facilitated a discursive shift that – while difficult to measure – likely helped create an ideological environment more enabling for Democrats than Republicans. While some critics might not interpret a second Obama term as a victory for the Left, we argue that in the current conjuncture Democratic administrations lessen the need for reactive protest against Republican social and foreign policy, and enable more proactive focus on the structural impediments to social and ecological justice.¹⁵ Furthermore, we argue, the movement endures in more recent initiatives like “Strike Debt” and “Occupy Our Homes.” Overall, the OWS movement created a set of important political opportunities for the Left. At the same time, we recognize that the Left has had difficulty taking up these opportunities and translating them into the kind of transformational social change that OWS participants and their supporters advocated. Overall, OWS opened a door that neither participants nor the broader Left were able to walk through. And in some

instances practices that successfully pushed open the door have worked *against* the nascent movement effectively passing through it.

Drawing on an extensive review of activist, journalistic, and academic literatures, our argument in this article is that Occupy's early success was driven by a dynamic assembling of Left tendencies under radical – particularly anarchist – leadership. We focus on three anarchist-inspired strategies that played a critical role in the rapid rise of OWS: extremely assertive non-violence, horizontalism, and the refusal to make demands. Given anarchist influence, debates over the success or failure of Occupy often serve as proxies for dissension over anarchism's political value.¹⁶ Occupy's anarchist inflections *were* central to its swift success. But the three features we've pinpointed – which exceed discrete anarchist influence – have both helped *and* hindered the developing movement. The context-specific impact of these features provides helpful learning for anarchists, autonomists, socialists, and social democrats.¹⁷

The Power of Dynamic Assembly

The most enduring lesson of OWS is the value of dynamically assembling different tendencies into a multitudinous force. As media theorist and political economist Nick Dyer-Witheford noted in his contribution to the 2010 collection *What Would it Mean to Win*:

The movement of movements has been tacitly split between autonomist and anarchist groups, with strong anti-statist perspectives, and socialist and social democratic movements, committed to governmental planning and welfare functions. Rather than repressing this tension, or

replaying it *ad infinitum*, it may be both more interesting for both sides and closer to the real practice of many activists to think about the potential interplay of these two poles.¹⁸

Occupy Wall Street nicely demonstrates Dyer-Witheyford's argument: Anarchist leadership was central to launching the movement but contributions from socialists and social democrats were integral to its overall success. Moreover the limitations of anarchist-inspired movement features like horizontalism and refusing demands began to reveal themselves as the encampments advanced, further evidencing the value of dynamic assembly (versus a case for anarchist or socialist universality).

Neither academic social movement theory nor North American activist culture is particularly attentive to the power of dynamic assembly. Political process theory (PPT) – the canonical approach in social movement studies – has assumed a competitive more than cooperative dynamic among different movement actors.¹⁹ Moreover it biases towards reformers or moderates as the political core of movements. According to Kathleen Fitzgerald and Diane Rogers:

The study of social movement organizations (SMOs) has generally been approached from the reform perspective that predominates within the social movement theoretical literature...When researchers have acknowledged SMOs as radical, they have tended to view them as contributing to the success of more moderate SMOs rather than analyzing RSMOs on their own terms.²⁰

In more recent work, Downey and Rohlinger analyze “social movement articulation” and begin to correct both the reform and competitive biases in social movement theory. They note, “Movements develop in a manner most propitious for long-term success when they

expand both the breadth of appeal and the depth of challenge, and when actors across the strategic frontier coordinate their activities toward social change (implicitly or explicitly).”²¹

Our interpretation of the Occupy case supports Downey and Rohlinger’s argument for social movement articulation but also reveals an important limitation. These authors assume that deep or radical challenges to the status quo will result in a narrowing of support.²² However, the assumption that radical tactics and ideas will diminish popular support is analytically and politically limiting; radicals can sometimes resonate more broadly and deeply with the public than reformers. The culturally attractive power of principled audaciousness was apparent during Occupy’s swift ascent. Throughout this article, we argue that the contemporary political context is likely to remain relatively supportive of radicalism. While canonical academic work on social movements has failed to properly take account of the value of radicalism, a growing body of research rooted in the radical left highlights radicalism’s significance and the potential for it to articulate with reform efforts.²³ The Occupy case evidences both the political value of radicalism, and the power of radicals working in dynamic assembly with other tendencies. We now turn to the three anarchist-inspired strategies that played a critical role in the rapid rise of OWS.

Extremely Assertive Non-Violence

OWS received scant media coverage in its first week, not even registering in Pew’s Project for Excellence in Journalism’s weekly indexing of news coverage. The key factor enabling Occupy to persist for a week amid police harassment and marginal media

attention was, according to David Graeber, that “students and other young people who simply dug themselves in and refused to leave.”²⁴ Prolonged illegal occupation of physical space, driven largely by young people, has proven to be a successful strategy. The duration of occupation provides time for a charismatic story to build.²⁵ Righteous will, exuberance, and sacrifice are pitted against the cold disciplinary prerogative of police and state.

But the ongoing occupation of Zuccotti Park was not the only factor responsible for OWS’s ultimate popularization. As we noted above, the movement only gained media attention after the September 24th arrests and pepper-spray attacks. The unpermitted march against traffic that precipitated these events is a key instance of what we are calling “extremely assertive non-violence”: unruly and assertive tactics that remain within the non-violent frame.²⁶ The next spike in media attention came on October 1st, when activists organized a march across Brooklyn Bridge. The first group to reach the bridge took the pre-approved pedestrian walkway, but another group of activists defiantly took to the road with many following.²⁷ The bridge was swarmed and traffic snarled. Protestors slowly marched across the bridge while police set up barricades on both ends, fencing activists in. The police arrested seven hundred protestors, many of whom were surprised, because they did not hear warnings and were not given a choice between dispersal and jail. Once again, the scene was filmed and posted to YouTube.

Popular interest in the movement exploded after these two events.²⁸ Images of young people putting their bodies on the line to protest rising inequality, and being aggressively handled by police, struck a popular chord. These spectacular events, coupled with the ongoing occupation of Zuccotti Park, created a dramatic narrative that proved

compelling for media and audience alike. At first glance, this was civil disobedience at its finest: people defying rules and sacrificing personal safety for a noble cause, prompting an aggressive response from authorities, and winning moral authority in the process. But while non-violent discipline was maintained, a key ingredient of these two actions was decentralized tactical assertiveness. Analyzing the Union Square and Brooklyn Bridge actions, activist author Nathan Schneider notes:

In both cases, the arrests directly followed instances of autonomous action by small groups, which splintered away from the plan established by the Direct Action Committee ... In both cases, too, the police responded to such autonomous action with violent overreaction, which in turn garnered tremendous interest from the media ... I've been forced to recognize that the messy stuff seems to work.²⁹

There is no fixed formula for successful deployment of the “messy stuff,” or extremely assertive non-violence. But what distinguishes it from traditional civil disobedience is its openness to decentralized and unruly assertiveness. Another name for this openness in recent Left history is the “diversity of tactics.” This framing emerged after protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999. During these events, a small band of black bloc anarchists defied the non-violent consensus and smashed the windows of corporate buildings downtown.³⁰

In the lead-up to the WTO ministerial in Seattle, the Direct Action Network (DAN) planned mass civil disobedience in front of the convention centre to block delegates from entering. Progressive groups focused their attention on mass street marches. Both the direct actionists associated with DAN, and larger progressive groups,

shared a commitment to non-violence and the eschewal of property destruction. In efforts to distance the broad Seattle coalition from the black bloc, prominent progressives like Maude Barlow, Lori Wallach, and Medea Benjamin all named jail the proper place for property-destroying anarchists.³¹ This invocation of police power to sideline ‘bad’ protesters had a reverse effect: it drove a wedge between progressive organizers and many of the radical direct actionists they worked with to successfully derail the WTO’s ministerial.

In Seattle’s wake, the “diversity of tactics” discourse was developed by radicals to make room for all activists – those who simply wanted to march, those willing to commit civil disobedience and risk arrest, and those interested in more disruptive tactics like property destruction or engaging the police.³² In the lead-up to OWS, organizers were open to a diversity of tactics while simultaneously promoting non-violence as the appropriate strategy for the conjuncture. Non-violence was promoted but not codified. Organizers believed that by avoiding imposition of a code, they would actually encourage those interested in property destruction to maintain non-violent discipline. As Foucault famously noted, “Where there is power, there is resistance.”³³

This formula of accepting a diversity of tactics while actively promoting non-violent discipline worked in New York, where spectacular property damage and police confrontation were rare.³⁴ At the same time, the diversity of tactics framework still made room for activists wanting to autonomously push the tactical envelope. While remaining technically non-violent, the extreme assertiveness in OWS actions was crucial to the movement’s mainstreaming. For sociologist Alex Vitale:

Think tanks, labor unions, and progressive politicians have railed against the corrupt marriage between financial and political elites to no avail. Millions of Facebook posts, tweets, and policy white papers have failed to galvanize a mass movement. Instead it was the occupation of public spaces, marching without permits, and disruption of daily life in the Financial District that signaled an open-ended defiance lacking in previous efforts.³⁵

Increasing inequality, intensified concerns around climate change, and limited formal avenues for addressing these grievances, sets the conditions for ongoing tactical escalation and defiance on the Left. Nevertheless, OWS also demonstrates the capacity of non-violent direct action to win moral authority and build mass movements. Property rights are fetishized in North America, making property destruction generally unpopular with the broader public. In fact, police plant *agent provocateurs* in movements to incite property destruction knowing that it can rob movements of moral authority and popular appeal.³⁶ It is important to note, however, that the public reception and political impact of property destruction depends entirely on context; it remains an important tool for social movements under the right circumstances.

Extremely assertive non-violence (EAN) is a product of the more general tactical escalation occurring on the Left, and will play an important role in coming actions and campaigns. At large events in urban centres where radical political community is more developed, the New York model is likely to be productive. Property destruction may still occur, but a decree against it can paradoxically accelerate its likelihood by creating an erotic charge around transgressing the codified limit. EAN's successful deployment in New York, however, is not reason to use it everywhere. For some communities, turning to

traditional civil disobedience will itself be a way of pushing the tactical envelope.

Likewise, establishing action agreements codifying non-violence will still make sense for particular events. Selection of the right type and degree of escalation depends on skillful assessment of the specific context within which an action is embedded.

Horizontalism

Horizontalism is a way of organizing and relating rooted in the assumption that human beings are fundamentally equal and should be directly involved in the central decisions affecting their lives. Marina Sitrin, whose research on Argentinean social movements has helped popularize the horizontalism concept in North America, notes how “horizontal relationships are a break with the logic of representation and vertical ways of organizing.”³⁷ During Occupy Wall Street, the General Assembly (GA) process was the key instance of horizontalism in practice. According to core OWS organizer Marisa Holmes: “The assembly was about leveling the playing field. It didn’t matter where you came from, how well known you were, or how much money you had. Everyone was equal in the assembly.”³⁸

The GA was the collective decision-making body in Zuccotti Park, and it operated on modified consensus. Participants needed to work through all objections to any proposal until the entire group could agree; the GA did not operate via majority rule. This said, if anyone firmly blocked a decision, which participants were free to do, the proposal could still pass with 90 percent support from the group. Communication at the GA occurred through “the people’s mic”: the practice of having outwardly radiating circles of listeners repeat the words of the speaker, so as to make the message audible to people at

the back of the crowd. This kind of consensus-based deliberative process, typically used with smaller groups, had not been attempted during recent mass assemblies in Spain and Greece. But at the urging of anarchist organizers, it was deployed in New York with important successes and limitations.³⁹

The primary strength of the New York General Assembly (NYGA) was its ability to accommodate a diverse body of people and facilitate their affective investment in the process. Richard Kim, writing in the *Nation*, captures the unifying effect of the assemblies:

OWS organizers are ... acutely aware that the movement's extraordinary potential lies in its ability to bring together a range of participants who coalesce maybe once in a generation: anarchists and Marxists of a thousand different sects, social democrats, community organizers, immigrants' rights activists, feminists, queers, anti-racist organizers, capitalists who want to save capitalism by restoring the Fordist truce, the simply curious and sympathetic ... the movement's emphasis on direct democracy, derived from anarchism ... has allowed such an unwieldy set of actors to occupy the same space.⁴⁰

The fact that all participants had a voice in decision-making facilitated the solidarity required for diverse participants to defy authorities and hold Zuccotti Park. Occupying Wall Street required impressive commitment and sacrifice, and the occupation might not have persisted if those assuming risk were not directly party to decision-making.

One of horizontalism's leading intellectuals, David Graeber, views horizontalism within a broader social change theory he calls "contaminationism," which he describes as

“the faith that the experience of direct democracy is infectious, that anyone exposed to it will never be the same, that exposing any significant number of people to it would inevitably lead to the creation of a new political culture.”⁴¹ Speaking in the early days of the occupation, Marina Sitrin shared a similar hope: “Perhaps, once we have assemblies throughout the country, the issue of demands upon others will become mute. If there are enough of us, we may one day only make demands of ourselves.”⁴² The basic theory is that mass exposure to consensus process will ignite a passion for a new politics that radically decentralizes decision-making power in all institutions, including schools, workplaces, and governing bodies.

The rapid spread of the OWS version of horizontalism – within two short months, to 750 cities worldwide – could be considered contaminationism in action. Thanks to OWS, horizontalism’s benefits were broadcast to a wider audience; these benefits include heightened solidarity among participants, leadership development through shared facilitation, the felt empowerment of being party to constitutive debate, and more optimal decisions rooted in the experiences of the affected.⁴³

But this same audience experienced some of horizontalism’s limits. While Occupy’s horizontal decision-making forged solidarity and commitment, it also promoted frustration and alienation. Consensus formation among a diverse mass can take a painfully long time. This problem was exacerbated by the people’s mic and the repetition it required. Moreover, the consensus process is easily derailed by participants who, for whatever reason, seek attention or want to cause disruption or outright obstruction. Finally, a consensus-based general assembly process favours those with time to spare for lengthy meetings.⁴⁴ By early October, organizers could see that mass consensus was not

working for such a large group. They undertook efforts to adopt a spokescouncil process for decision-making. Spokescouncils involve representatives or “spokes” converging from different working groups to make decisions. As Marisa Holmes recalls: “We explained that spokescouncils came from indigenous traditions, that they were horizontal, accountable, and empowered caucuses. We explained that the inclusivity of working groups and rotations of spokes ensured that it would not become an elite representative body.”⁴⁵ The proposed change met considerable resistance, but after being tabled multiple times, the spokescouncil proposal passed modified consensus in late October. Two weeks later, occupiers were evicted by the NYPD. The spokescouncil persisted into the new year, and consistent efforts have been undertaken since the eviction to seek coordination among the different working groups. However, OWS currently lives on in largely decentralized and loosely coordinated form.

Proponents of horizontalism emphasize that it is an open-ended process more than a fixed ideology. However, antipathy towards representative structure is built into popular definitions (like Sitrin’s, cited above); the idea that we will one day “only make demands of ourselves” suggests a resistance toward the development of any representative structures at all. This antipathy limits horizontalism’s application at larger scales. A key lesson from OWS, however, is that horizontalism and more representative structures can be complementary. Speaking to occupiers in the early days of the encampment, Naomi Klein remarked that “being horizontal and deeply democratic is wonderful. But these principles are compatible with the hard work of building structures and institutions that are sturdy enough to weather the storms ahead.”⁴⁶

Representation and collectively funded social programs can free the demos from having to constantly participate in all aspects of social reproduction; otherwise, our direct participation in all the decisions affecting our lives could easily consume those very lives. Key programs from public healthcare (in Canada) to garbage pick-up are managed, with varying success, by elected officials and public employees. Drawing on the work of political theorist Corey Robin, Chris Maisano argues that “any left project worthy of the name seeks to free people from the need to answer the bell, the need to endlessly attend to the exigencies of everyday social reproduction so that we can get on with the truly important things in life.”⁴⁷ Political participation is truly important, but increasing avenues for democratic intervention – including, for example, the opening of budgetary processes at all levels of government and in Left organizations – is more likely to promote felt freedom and popular interest than horizontalizing decision-making in all realms of life (and the ramping up of responsibility this would entail).

Representative structures can promote organizational resilience by empowering representatives to work full-time on issues. For social movement organizations, and the larger institutions they are seeking to transform, the democratic imperative should not be the collapse of representative structures – as horizontalism appears to advocate. Instead, the goal is to widen avenues for constituent participation, combining deep democracy with representative structures. One of the most successful Left campaigns in 2012 – the Quebec Student Strike – effectively deployed this mixed approach. In February 2012, Quebec students launched a strike to protest a proposed tuition hike of 75 percent. At the actions’ peak, over three hundred thousand students were striking. The actions came to an

official end in September 2012 when the new provincial government cancelled the hike and instituted a tuition freeze.

A careful mix of deep democracy and representative structure was central to the strike's successful execution. The Broad Coalition of the Association of Student-Union Solidarity (CLASSE) was a key coordinating organization for the strike, and was composed of individual student unions. Student unions in Quebec are often organized along departmental and faculty lines, making them smaller and more accessible. All key decisions during the strike were made in these smaller union assemblies using majoritarian voting, thus avoiding the time burdens often associated with consensus. These individual unions each sent delegates to the larger CLASSE congress that coordinated the strike. Delegates were required to respect the mandate of their assemblies and were not granted autonomous decision-making power. Delegate authority was renewed each union meeting so that delegates stayed accountable to their constituents. Moreover, the strike itself was re-voted each week. The democratic organization of Quebec's student movement thus ensured that striking students felt ownership over decisions reached, thus increasing their willingness to assume risk.⁴⁸ But the movement's representative structure was also integral to the coordination of a province-wide strike lasting six months.

A key lesson of the actions of OWS and CLASSE is the importance of striking the context-appropriate balance between democratic control and representative structure. This is a central issue for Left institutions and movements to internally address as they work to ensure more equitable distributions of wealth and decision-making power in the wider society. Horizontal organizing and decision-making can encourage greater

democratization in Left institutions and the wider society, but horizontalism's advocates' current resistance to representative structures limits its applicability beyond temporary assemblies and smaller grassroots organizations.

The Refusal to Make Demands

The NYGA's refusal to articulate concrete demands caused considerable consternation among progressives. Many occupiers themselves were eager to formulate demands.⁴⁹ But anarchists resisted these calls on principle. According to David Graeber, a "reason for the much-discussed refusal to issue demands is that issuing demands means recognizing the legitimacy – or at least the power – of those of whom the demands are made."⁵⁰ For anarchists and other autonomists, resisting demands was a radical refusal to legitimate hierarchical market and state institutions. This refusal, far from universal among participants, had the practical effect of making room for political diversity. Autonomists felt represented while others could assume demands would coalesce with time.⁵¹ This compromise could not be sustained indefinitely, but it worked to keep OWS a big-tent affair in the short term. Like horizontal process, the refusal to make demands allowed a diverse body to share the same space and name.

The refusal to make demands was largely rooted in an ideological antipathy to hierarchical state and market institutions; it was not driven by strategic polling of popular sentiment. Recently, however, some anarchist thinkers have begun to present the idea of "make no demands" as a strategy of social change. The refusal to put forward demands, these thinkers believe, actually accelerates the implementation of these very demands. As Graeber recently argued: "While we can't, and would never want to, write the legislation

or make the executive decisions, it is absolutely crucial that, as a social movement, we provide the moral framework, and the political context, in which these events are going to take place.”⁵² Graeber’s basic claim is that reforms will happen and to ensure that these reforms are politically enabling, movements should refuse the process and focus their attention on prefiguring robust alternatives that point beyond the reforms in question. In this view, outright refusal of the political process, coupled with prefigured alternatives, will encourage more useful reforms than direct engagement of the policy process, be it through direct action, lobbying, or electoral campaigns.

Members of El Kilombo Intergalactico, an autonomist organization in Durham N.C., provide a concrete example of this general approach in a recent conversation with Michael Hardt:

The Black Panther Party here in the U.S. didn’t say, “we want a national breakfast program;” instead, they built a breakfast program that fed tens of thousand of children. J. Edgar Hoover identified these programs as the greatest weapon in the hands of the Panthers and subsequently the federal government stepped in to create free breakfast programs in public schools. The same thing took place with the Panthers’ sickle cell anemia project.⁵³

Examining the precise connections between autonomous Panther programs and resulting policy outcomes is beyond the scope of this article, but the basic strategy being described here worked for Occupy Wall Street. OWS is too young to have produced lasting policy outcomes, but its popular resonance helped change the public conversation away from austerity and towards income inequality, thus nurturing a more supportive ideological

environment for Obama's campaign. This was *not* the intent of occupiers, many of who are vigorously critical of not only Obama's record, but also the entire electoral process. Indeed, had occupiers collectively endorsed Obama or made concrete demands of his administration during its first phase, their encampment would likely have remained in the shadows.

The refusal strategy outlined by Graeber and El Kilombo teeters on the edge of irrationality – refusing demands while suggesting refusal as a sound path to having demands met – and yet it yielded some positive outcomes in the case of OWS (mainly a shift in public discourse with electoral effects). We are not, however, endorsing this strategy for widespread application. The Quebec student movement, for example, was animated by a simple and specific demand: 'Together, block the hike.' Student leaders effectively articulated this demand with a wider critique of neoliberalism and austerity, thus broadening their base of support to include trade unions and the wider public.⁵⁴ The wider critique of neoliberalism has also helped the movement endure beyond the achievement of their minimum demand. The CLASSE approach will appeal to socialists, social democrats, and some autonomists. It will be anathema, however, to many autonomists and anarchists resistant to making demands of state and market institutions. The continued influence of the anti-statist Left demands an understanding of how this tendency can articulate with the broader Left.

What is the appropriate relationship between radicals refusing to make demands and those others (radical or otherwise) who engage the political process? Autonomists played a central role in OWS's success, but so did many reform-minded groups, as we describe below. The refusal strategy relies on the efforts of Leftists willing to engage the

formal political process, a point that autonomists have generally been reluctant to affirm. In order to quiet recriminations between groups and facilitate cooperation, the benefits and limitations of a refusal strategy should be better understood by both autonomists and the broader Left. Autonomists who refuse demands and prioritize prefigurative work can still affirm the import of other Leftists engaging in particular reform struggles; meanwhile, advocates of these reforms may come to see that their efforts can be paradoxically accelerated by effective refusal and prefiguration.

Autonomists and the Broader Left

Recent work in social movement research emphasizes activist strategy as a key factor explaining a movement's emergence, success, and decline.⁵⁵ While Political Process Theory has historically placed greater emphasis on shifts in the formal political environment – what are called “political opportunity structures” – when explaining movement emergence, this new work focuses additionally on activist agency and strategic choice in explanations of movement dynamics. For example, Marshall Ganz describes how an analytical focus on strategy helps explain why Cesar Chavez, and what would become the United Farm Workers, succeeded at winning contracts for farm workers while better resourced unions like the Teamsters failed.⁵⁶

Strategic choice played a central role in Occupy's emergence. In October 2011, when Occupy was at its peak, journalist Micah Sifry posed an important question: Why did OWS resonate with popular publics when better-resourced initiatives like “Rebuild the Dream” did not?⁵⁷ Sifry's tentative answer was that “Occupy Wall Street isn't slick. It isn't focus-grouped. It isn't something professional activists would do. Instead, it feels

authentic.”⁵⁸ Sifry also noted that OWS “isn’t afraid to talk about revolution, a subject that may be on more minds than people realize.”⁵⁹ Radical principles and practices are not generally expected to broaden a movement’s public support, and yet in the case of OWS they did. Occupy’s rapid rise challenged both political common sense and canonical social movement theorizing.

And yet it is crucial to note that OWS organizers worked within the frame of what Graeber calls “pragmatic anarchism”: a deep commitment to anarchist principles coupled with attentiveness to the value of popular appeal and alignment with other political tendencies.⁶⁰ Anarchist organizers strongly emphasized Gandhian non-violence as the most effective strategy for winning mass support. Similarly the “99 percent” framing is populist; it targeted the perverse effects of wealth concentration while creating a wide space within which dissenters could challenge the status quo. Occupy Wall Street’s radical organizers self-consciously sought an audience beyond the choir.

The same strategic sensibility that resulted in the 99 percent slogan and the emphasis on Gandhian nonviolence also led organizers to reach out beyond radical ranks. Even before the occupation began, organizers began soliciting support from unions and community groups.⁶¹ These efforts resulted in material and logistical support from diverse groups. For example, unions supplied thousands of dollars’ worth of pizza,⁶² a local soup kitchen donated its facilities for cooking,⁶³ Greenpeace supplied energy via its mobile solar power centre,⁶⁴ SEIU 1199 and the National Nurses United donated medical supplies,⁶⁵ and the United Federation of Teachers provided a mailroom for the flood of donated goods.⁶⁶ The National Lawyers Guild had twenty attorneys undertaking research and litigation for OWS.⁶⁷ Moreover, diverse organizations and groups joined with OWS

in campaigns and protests. Unions and community groups organized a large march and rally in solidarity with Occupy on October 5th.⁶⁸ Unions and progressive groups also played a key role resisting Brookfield Properties' efforts to evict occupiers from Zuccotti Park.⁶⁹ The pressure applied from multiple directions convinced Brookfield to walk away from eviction. This victory helped solidify the movement by ensuring that income inequality would occupy the mediascape for another month.

Overall, organizing efforts by autonomists, coupled with substantive buy-in from labour and NGOs, created snowballing interest in the movement: increasing media coverage, well-publicized celebrity visits, and political endorsements. The "cool factor" crafted through righteous, risky, and audacious action came together with the legitimating force of more established reform-oriented organizations and created a powerful engine of popularity for Occupy. A key question remains, on which much analytical work by academics and activists should focus: How can the multi-tendency dynamism that enabled Occupy's early successes be carried forward to drive more substantive gains?

Conclusions

Anarchist-influenced strategies contributed significantly to the success of early OWS in influencing public discourse. Extremely assertive non-violence helped launch a highly charismatic movement; horizontalism helped people of diverse backgrounds and purposes feel that the General Assembly was a place they could be heard; and the refusal to articulate demands helped OWS participants avoid reifying the power structures they'd come to Zuccotti Park to challenge, while enabling the formation of a broad oppositional force. The OWS movement had a widespread impact on public discourse, focusing

attention on vast and deepening social inequalities and the systems that had enabled them. This refocusing of discourse, we believe, is a significant achievement.

However, over time, aspects of the anarchist-inspired OWS approach have proven unwieldy and difficult to sustain and scale up. As well, OWS has been unable to carry forward any substantive social transformations. In this article, we have argued that as a result of both its successes and its challenges, OWS is a site of important social learning.⁷⁰ Specifically, experiences at OWS offer critical insights into how its anarchist-inspired strategies can be adapted into broader political programs that can draw diverse Left tendencies together. Based on our analysis of OWS, we argue that three principles for these programs are (1) the strategy of tactical escalation within a non-violent frame, (2) a commitment to democratizing institutions but without collapsing representative structures, and (3) a commitment to systemic transformation coupled with an appreciation that reform can also play a role in helping move toward another world. Taken together, these three principles can form points of assembly for the multitudinous Left.

Overall, in this article, we have made a case for openness among tendencies on the Left. In short, from experiences at OWS, the value of radical praxis should be clearer to social democrats; similarly, the benefits of effective representation and concrete organizing efforts engaging directly with formal political institutions should be more apparent to autonomists. Radical organizing ignited OWS, but without input from the broader Left, the movement would have had less force. Our hope in unpacking Occupy Wall Street's success, and current impasse, is that this case study can help the Left become more self-conscious about the political value of maintaining openness to different tendencies and constantly changing circumstance.

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