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A Brief History of Occupy Wall Street

By Ethan Earle

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The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is an internationally operating, progressive non-profit institution for civic education. In cooperation with many organizations around the globe, it works on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development, and peaceful conflict resolution.

The New York Office serves two major tasks: to work around issues concerning the United Nations and to engage in dialogue with North American progressives in universities, unions, social movements, and politics.

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Spontaneity and Organization

In Lower Manhattan, in a small plaza called Zuccotti Park, Occupy Wall Street was born in September of 2011. While the first Occupiers had originally come to protest Wall Street, once the actual occupation began their game plan was not entirely clear. What were their goals and how would they pursue them?

In spite of this lack of clarity—and also paradoxically because of it—Occupy rapidly began to spread throughout the United States and abroad. From major cities to small towns in rural America, people seemed drawn to this sudden explosion of outrage aimed broadly against all that was wrong with American society. Within two weeks there were dozens of occupations modeled after Zuccotti Park; after a month there were many hundreds. Every new day saw a whirlwind of developments—new occupations, protests, debates, critiques, and proposed solutions.

Though the movement did not issue clear-cut demands, one thing quickly became evident: that this was a movement of the “99%,” of the broad masses of people robbed of their due share of society’s wealth and opportunities by millionaires and billionaires, i.e. by the “1%.” The movement aimed to reverse the trend from preceding decades by which the neoliberal agenda of U.S. and global capitalism had tremendously increased social and economic inequality. And in reintroducing the issue of class to the American public agenda, the Occupy movement led what can only be considered a rebirth of the U.S. Left.

This radical approach, combined with the incredibly rapid expansion of the movement, perplexed and upset the powers that be and captured the imagination of broad segments of the public. After decades of despair and low visibility among the U.S. Left—as Ethan Young analyses in his study “Mapping the Left” (www.rosalux-nyc.org)—suddenly a progressive movement was headline news and could not be ignored. And for the first time in decades, the Left had a major impact on the broader populace; millions upon millions of people could relate to its protest, and in particular to its key issue: the social divide. In an era in which many had come to believe the neoliberal credo that “there is no alternative,” suddenly there came an opening reminiscent of what the movement against neoliberal globalization had previously claimed, that “another world is possible.”

In this study, Ethan Earle, project manager at the New York office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, provides what might be the first detailed account of the history of Occupy Wall Street, from its beginnings to its current state. This work is an important contribution to a complex and fast-developing conversation over how and why Occupy happened and what will become of it. Earle gives the reader a strong framework through which to understand the movement and develop his or her own ideas about its legacy and its future. By drawing attention to Rosa Luxemburg’s own dialectic of spontaneity and organization, he also comes up with timely suggestions regarding the direction the movement should take.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg
Co-Directors of New York Office, November 2012*

A Brief History of Occupy Wall Street

By Ethan Earle

From its inception, a principal characteristic of Occupy Wall Street—born September 17 in a small park in downtown New York City—has been its pluralistic nature. The earliest occupiers of Zuccotti Park erected a big tent, so to speak, and welcomed just about everybody in. In this way they quickly transformed their protest into a space for both dissent and the creation of alternatives for many different people with many different things to say. This characteristic was and continues to be central to the phenomenon's success, helping it spread rapidly across the country, capturing public imagination and perplexing the powers that be.

This same characteristic also makes it difficult to write about OWS as a single unified phenomenon, for OWS has never limited itself to one voice or defined its own shape or scope. Rather, it has brought forth a countless number of voices, and defined and redefined its shape and scope a countless number of times. The results, of course, have been uneven and uncertain, and their impact in broader society remains hotly contested.

Despite these analytic difficulties, OWS is something that we as a society must try to better understand. What do we make of this seemingly spontaneous explosion, spreading in a way and at a speed rarely seen in U.S. history? In my judgment it has been a unique phenomenon, reinvigorating and repositioning the U.S. Left and altering the framework for future progressive movements throughout the country.

In this context, a brief yet fairly comprehensive history of the first year of Occupy Wall Street is crucial for enhancing public education and furthering debate. For despite the many bits and pieces floating around the Internet, the details of exactly what happened and why have not been adequately brought together in a single account. The history I tell is based mostly on the stories of people involved with Occupy, other press and social media accounts, academic analyses, and my own observations as a person living in New York and supportive of Occupy Wall Street as a progressive popular protest.

The Beginnings

The call to action most directly precipitating the occupation of Wall Street was made by the anti-consumerist Canadian magazine *Ad-busters*. In a July 13 blog post they urged people to converge on lower Manhattan on September 17 and “set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few

months.” It would be a U.S. uprising in the spirit of Egypt's Tahrir Square, the magazine envisioned.

On August 2, an anti-budget cut coalition convened a general assembly to prepare for the September 17 demonstration near the famous

Charging Bull statue in Manhattan's financial district. While the coalition itself was composed largely of veteran protest groups and small political organizations, the meeting also attracted a handful of other activists, mostly unaffiliated with hierarchical groups and sympathetic with anarchist principles. Among them was noted activist and scholar David Graeber, together with several others who had participated in the so-called anti-globalization movement.

Unhappy with what they saw as an undemocratic meeting, the group formed a separate circle, where they agreed on a consensus decision-making process, broke out into working groups (outreach, action, and facilitation), and then reconvened to share decisions and plan subsequent meetings. Two days later the group met again and produced their first pamphlet, entitled "We are the 99 %," a proclamation that would later serve as a motto for the Occupy movement.

Over the next six weeks this group continued to meet, often in Tompkins Square Park in Manhattan's East Village, to plan the September 17 demonstration. Graeber and other members of the original circle—a number of whom also had experience in protest movements from Spain to Greece to Tunisia—were gradually joined by a smattering of hardened New York activists and young people with "small-a" anarchist sympathies, as reported by Graeber. Meanwhile, *Adbusters* continued to promote the upcoming action and, on August 23, the activist hacking group Anonymous joined in, releasing a video and beginning to tweet its support.

On September 17, anywhere between 800¹ and "at least 2,000" protestors convened and marched through Downtown Manhattan, even-

tually gathering in Zuccotti Park², a privately owned public space nestled between Broadway and Church Street, halfway en route from the World Trade Center to the head of Wall Street. That afternoon the first OWS General Assembly was held and a few hundred protestors decided to spend the night occupying the plaza. Free meals—donated by local sympathizers—were distributed, while protestors sang, danced, and engaged in other forms of performance art. Police presence was heavy throughout the day and night, but no serious attempt was made to halt the protest or dislodge the occupation. At a press conference earlier in the day, Mayor Michael Bloomberg commented: "People have a right to protest, and if they want to protest, we'll be happy to make sure they have locations to do it."

At an assembly the next morning in Zuccotti, the issue of demands was broached. A wide array of grievances was aired, with goals including a more equitable distribution of wealth, less influence of corporations and especially the finance sector over politics, more and better jobs, an end to foreclosures, bank reform, and various types of debt forgiveness—in sum, a halt to the rising inequality and economic injustice plaguing the country.

However, it would be untrue to the nature of the movement to give the impression that people were simply protesting a faltering economy. From the start, the occupation served as a point of convergence for an incredibly wide range of critiques and viewpoints: big, small, radical, moderate, revolutionary, reformist—united mostly by a broad sense of injustice and converging in a public (physical and metaphorical) space where they knew they could express themselves. Not surprisingly, no final decisions regarding demands were made that day, other

1 While crowd size is always a subject of some dispute, in the case of OWS it has been particularly politicized, and estimates vary widely according to the source. In this case, 800 is the number widely cited in the press, while "at least 2,000" is an estimate made by David Graeber.

2 A 1961 NYC zoning resolution allowing developers to build taller buildings as long as they also provided open "public" spaces. An important particularity of this type of space is that it is in theory to be kept open 24 hours a day.

than the common agreement that protestors' voices would no longer be ignored.

Later the same day, police threatened to arrest protestors for using a bullhorn in the park, leading them to the decision to speak "together in one voice, louder than any amplifier." This meant the beginning of the "human microphone," in which people gathered around a speaker together repeat what the speaker has just said, thus amplifying his or her voice. While this technique had been used in previous protests in the U.S. and abroad, it had never gained such popular traction as it would in OWS. In the next days the assembly would refine a system of codes (mic and temperature checks, twinkles) to better communicate in the assemblies, which in addition to the Occupiers were increasingly being attended by people who were sympathetic or simply curious about what was happening. More broadly, a culture was beginning to emerge within the park itself. On the one hand, people suddenly living together in a small space were figuring out the details of cohabitation. On the other, people drawn together by their critiques of a flawed world were beginning to experiment with how to create a better one, if only within the narrow confines of a city square.

Meanwhile, out on the streets, the next days saw a series of marches and protests throughout the Financial District and Battery Park, with the chants "We are the 99 %" and "This is what democracy looks like" firmly establishing themselves as protest favorites. These actions were attended by anywhere from a few dozen to sev-

eral hundred people, most of whom belonged to the core group occupying the plaza. Police were reported to be present in large numbers and vigilant, but not particularly hostile.

On the fifth day of protest, September 22, OWS activists infiltrated and disrupted an auction at Sotheby's in New York's Upper East Side to protest the company's union-busting tactics and workforce lockout. This action constituted a development in the protest, which for the first time left Downtown Manhattan to support a specific, pre-existing conflict in the broader community. Ongoing OWS support for the Sotheby's art handlers would become a symbol for its fight against the excesses of the 1%, and in June 2012 the workers, organized by the Teamsters Local 814 union, would finally claim victory.

On September 23, the occupation for the first time received more than fleeting coverage in the mainstream press, from the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*. However, it would be incorrect to think that the preceding paucity of media had prevented the occupation from gaining broader traction outside of New York. On the contrary, solidarity occupations had already sprouted up in major North American cities including Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Toronto, and were also being reported in more far-flung locales like London, Amsterdam, Madrid, Milan, Algiers, Tel Aviv, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Sydney. Much of this early diffusion resulted from social media activity—essentially the Facebook and blog posts and Tweets of mostly younger protestors.

Occupy Wall Street Goes Viral

In an OWS demonstration on September 24, police officers entrapped four young female protestors in orange mesh netting and a white-

collar officer sprayed them with mace, hitting two squarely in the face. The attack was caught on film and quickly went viral via YouTube and

other media outlets. While a number of protestors had already been mistreated, this brazen act of violence marked a shift in the relationship between protestors and the police and state. At least 80 other protestors were arrested that day in New York in what represented a clear escalation of police repression to put a halt to the fast-growing movement. The outcome, ironically in that regard, was a sharp spike in media coverage of the protests and also a dramatic rise in new occupations throughout the United States and Canada.

The last days of September and first week of October witnessed a continued increase in coordinated protest activity under the Occupy banner. On October 1 in New York, more than 700 protestors were arrested as they attempted to cross the Brooklyn Bridge. Four days later, an estimated 15,000 people marched from Foley Square, near City Hall, to Zuccotti Park. The march included a stronger union presence than previously seen, notably the Transit Workers Union in an active organizing role and the formal endorsement of the AFL-CIO.³ These large demonstrations also garnered more media coverage than previous events. Meanwhile, public sympathies for the movement soared (to over 50% according to some polls), while new occupations and demonstrations continued springing up around North America at an ever more feverish pace.

As is often the case, political figures began to take notice. Influential Senator Russ Feingold and Representative John Larson were among the first to support the protests, and a day after the October 5 marches President Barack Obama came out on the issue:

I think it expresses the frustrations the American people feel, that we had the biggest financial crisis since the Great Depression, huge collateral damage all throughout the country [...] and yet you're

still seeing some of the same folks who acted irresponsibly trying to fight efforts to crack down on the abusive practices that got us into this in the first place.

His words seemed to suggest, at best, a certain degree of sympathy and, at worst, the political calculation that Occupy was not to be taken lightly.

Early on, Mayor Bloomberg himself had maintained some air of ambivalence about the protests, even while the actions of his police department suggested increasing opposition and hostility. In fact, as late as October 10 he had stated: "The bottom line is, people want to express themselves, and as long as they obey the laws, we'll allow them to." However, just two days later, citing "unsanitary conditions" Bloomberg announced that protestors had two days to clear the square so that Zuccotti Park property owner Brookfield Office could clean. The order was widely considered to be a ruse intended to put an end to the occupation. Protestors responded by vowing not to leave and quickly mounted their own campaign to clean the park. On October 14, after meeting with other key local politicians, the mayor backed down.

Occupy's next major move was to throw its growing weight behind a global day of protests convened by Spain's Movimiento 15-M (or Indignados) to mark its five-month anniversary. The Spanish protests—broadly directed against the country's political and economic system, and more specifically criticizing a series of neo-liberal "structural adjustment" policies cutting social services in the midst of a crippling recession—had (according to Spanish RTVE) drawn between 6.5 and 8 million protestors. By October 15, the day of the protest, a list of proposed events showed actions in 951 cities in 82 countries, with most identifying themselves as part of Occupy. That day, hundreds of thousands marched in Madrid, Barcelona, Rome and Va-

³ The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, which represents more than 11 million workers, is the largest and most influential union federation in the United States.

lencia, and thousands more in cities around the world, while in the U.S. demonstrations took place in hundreds of cities, with the largest in New York bringing an estimated 50,000 people.

By now it had become clear that OWS was casting a shadow much longer than the collective number of its participants would suggest. Indeed, perhaps the most notable feature of OWS during this period was its sudden, outsized impression on a broad swath of public culture. Throughout early October, multiple occupations per day had been popping up in cities large and small. While many of these occupations were little more than a few dozen people, a critical mass had been reached and each new demonstration or occupation seemed to grow on the last and give more momentum to the phenomenon as a whole. The surprise of this happening in a country with so little reputation for activism in past decades certainly played a role in this dynamic. Towns that had seen little if any protest in decades—an eternity for some in a society with a notoriously short cultural memory—were suddenly sites of political activism, where people were able to give shape to broad feelings of injustice and share them with others, both in their town and elsewhere in the world using the Internet.

At roughly the same time another trend was becoming evident: police, media, and other defenders of the status quo were moving into a new phase of increased aggression and hostility toward OWS. While most established powers had never been friendly to Occupy, there had previously existed at least a thin veneer of rhetoric that protestors, while perhaps misguided, had a fundamental right to voice their complaints. Starting in mid-October, efforts greatly increased to crack down on protests by any means necessary. Even more disturbing was ⁴“strong evidence that Occupy organizers have been infiltrated, spied upon, and aggres-

sively harassed by the counterterrorism unit of the (New York Police) department’s Intelligence Division.”

The October 15 protests resulted in 175 arrests in Chicago, 100 in Boston, 90 in New York, 50 in Phoenix, and dozens more across the country. A few days later, 130 more were arrested in Chicago. Then, on October 25, 75 occupiers were arrested and evicted from Occupy Oakland for “illegal lodging” outside City Hall. The move was a preface for a new wave in the state response to what was happening, as government officials throughout the country would soon begin aggressively breaking up encampments. That evening, police arrested 97 more people who were attempting to continue occupying a nearby space, spraying tear gas in the process and seriously injuring Iraq War veteran Scott Olsen, who would become a symbol of the moment and outspoken critic of the state’s violent hypocrisy.

Meanwhile, mainstream media reactions—which had passed through phases of ignoring and then appearing befuddled by the leaderless movement that refused to voice demands—were now positively seething with contempt. In fact, OWS was generating open hostility in the traditional U.S. press in a way that had not been seen in a generation. This hostility was so persistent and overt as to begin to form part of the phenomenon itself, particularly in cities like New York. For months, the notorious *New York Post* ran story after story denigrating every aspect of the allegedly “open anti-Semites, homeless people and anarchists, along with students, trust-fund babies and the terminally bored.”⁵ The tactic undoubtedly worked on many people, but it also had the effect of galvanizing support in favor of Occupy Wall Street.

In the face of this increased hostility, OWS continued to expand its presence in other ways

4 From an article by Michael Greenberg in *The New York Review of Books*, October 11, 2012.

5 *New York Post*, October 16, 2011.

through the first days of November. On November 2, Occupy Oakland called the nation's first general strike since 1946. An estimated 5% of the city's formal work population took the day off, shutting down parts of the city and notably marching on and closing the Port of Oakland, the fifth busiest container port in the country. The evening saw an escalation of black bloc actions⁶ by some protestors, who damaged a Whole Foods and several other storefronts. Police responded with batons, rubber bullets, dispensing tear-gas canisters and also flash-bang grenades.

Three days later a Bank Transfer Day, planned for weeks and supported by OWS, was held throughout the country. Significantly, the action was linked to consumer protests against a September 29 decision by Bank of America to charge a \$5 monthly fee for debit card transactions. Between September 29 and November 5, some 600,000 people in the United States moved billions of dollars into credit unions, despite the fact that Bank of America announced plans to cancel the fee on November 1. On November 5 alone, some 50,000 people were estimated to have left commercial banks for credit unions.

Inside the Occupation

While Occupy's most visible aspect during this period was the rapid proliferation of occupations and actions in towns and cities across North America, what fueled much of this expansion was the immense amount of creation taking place within each encampment. Indeed, experimentation with pre-figurative politics—in which protestors create miniature versions of the society they wish to see—fast became a principal feature of OWS.

Much of what was created emerged from the general assemblies that served as principal decision-making bodies in each encampment. These assemblies differed widely over time and place, and included anywhere from a handful to many hundreds of people, but most shared certain features. For one, they employed consensus-based decision-making models and actively pursued strategies to eliminate or at least minimize hierarchy and centralized control. Fa-

cilitation and other similar functions were often rotated, and anybody was given the opportunity to submit a proposal or speak their mind on any issue. Predictably, what was said and proposed was incredibly diverse—sometimes frustrating, sometimes brilliant.⁷ But nearly everything done in OWS—from neighborhood outreach to actions against banks to proclamations about the rights of immigrants—passed through these general assemblies to be debated, amended, and either sent back for further revision or passed through a consensus vote.

Much of the work going into and coming out of these assemblies was done by the dozens of so-called working groups and affinity groups that, together with the assemblies, most nurtured the “open tent” ethos of OWS. At the many meetings held by these groups, participants would discuss their thoughts and needs, how to support or further their cause, and how it fit into the broader “movement.” Meetings had no formal leaders, though par-

⁶ A protest tactic in which people wear black clothing, conceal their faces to prevent being recognized, and often commit acts of vandalism and seek to provoke police violence. Oakland's Black Bloc was the most militant in the U.S. and elicited critical responses from many in the broader OWS movement. See Barbara Epstein, “Occupy Oakland: the question of violence,” in: *Socialist Register* 2013.

⁷ Oftentimes requiring 90 % consensus for approval, though this too varied over time and from one occupation to the next.

ticular members would often act as moderators or otherwise drive meeting agendas. Facilitators, or “stack-keepers,” would often encourage people to “step forward, or step back” based on how much they had spoken. Other volunteers would take meeting minutes for those not in attendance, and also to make developments available to the general public. A small sampling of these groups, giving only a glimpse into the enormous breadth of activity, includes: Movement Building, Politics & Electoral Reform, Occupy Yoga, Alternative Currencies, Occupy the Hood, Direct Action, and Occupalooza, also known as Occupicnic.

While much of this creation was related to the advancement of political and cultural ideals, there was also the essential matter of maintaining living standards in the various occupations. For this, other working groups were created to manage tasks, ranging from cooking to cleaning and sanitation to the distribution of blankets and other living essentials. Still other groups dealt with nuts-and-bolts tasks such as accounting, meeting facilitation, media outreach, and the maintenance of the vast OWS archives and People’s Libraries.

In spite of their notable successes in recreating microcosms of more radically inclusive societies, Occupy was of course still subject to some of the problems that they criticized in the world around them. One such problem, not surprisingly, had to do with money. By the middle of October OWS had somewhere in the neighborhood of \$500,000, largely received in donations via the fiscal sponsorship of the Alliance for Global Justice. Conflicts began to emerge over the accountability of that money, as well as the nature of the projects on which it was being spent, with accusations ranging from mismanagement to naïveté to outright theft.

There was also the emergence of class conflict, both inside the physical encampments and in the broader development of the movement.

One such conflict revolved around people looking for free food or a secure place to sleep, but without participating or acting in consonance with the protest side of OWS. A similar fissure emerged among those who were there for the protest, dividing those of greater and lesser material need and social capital. As OWS grew—in size, scope, and complexity—these divisions also became evident in attempts to create new decision-making structures. The creation of a “spokes councils” as a representative body to supplement general assemblies was particularly criticized as a bureaucratizing instrument that reinforced pre-existing inequities; namely, that it was an institution designed by and favoring educated white males. Meanwhile, the consensus process was also criticized as favoring those who spoke best, loudest, and longest, while permitting a relative minority to block decisions that were widely popular.

Race and gender conflict also mirrored, to a certain extent, the problems that afflict broader society. Cases of oppression, exclusion, cooptation, and in a few cases physical violence were all reported. In the best of cases this led to open exchanges about the myriad ways these conflicts are imbricated in our society. However, there have also been moments when OWS actions have been too narrowly driven by its core participants—who are disproportionately white, educated, and possessing of social capital—and have fallen deaf to the voices of the most marginalized, even while they ostensibly fight on their behalf. For the most part this race, gender, and class violence has not been explicit, but rather has manifested in cultures of exclusion and the reproduction of white patriarchy in meetings and decision-making processes. Quite simply, there were too many instances in which people of color were not made to feel welcome, and in which the voices of women and other-gendered people were not heard with equal consideration. To complicate matters, this reproduction of oppression was typically perpetrated by people who considered themselves

(and truly are, in comparison to the broader population), quite sensitive to these very issues. Finally, from early on there emerged conflicts over the direction the movement should take. True to the nature of Occupy, the conflicts were numerous and varied widely in seriousness and scale. However, one broadly defined disagreement involved whether there should be greater focus on sustaining life inside the park or growing the movement outside the park. This boiled down to a theoretical and strategic debate over whether energy was better spent creating pre-figurative societies or conducting outreach

to bring awareness to new populations and new geographies. Even within these two basic sides there were many internal disagreements and divisions. For those seeking to actively spread and grow the movement, for example, there were heated arguments over the role of violence in protest, particularly emerging from the use of black bloc tactics in Occupy Oakland. This debate became highly publicized through a scathing article by Chris Hedges condemning the tactic, entitled “The Cancer in Occupy,” followed by an equally heated rejoinder by David Graeber in the form of an open letter to Hedges.⁸

Police Evictions and a Winter of Discontent

While the first high-profile eviction took place in late October (of Occupy Oakland), the majority did not begin until mid-November. Sadly, the loss of life precipitated some of the earlier efforts. On November 10, a man was killed near a smaller Occupy Oakland encampment that had replaced the first. The same day, a man was found dead in a tent in Occupy Burlington, having apparently committed suicide. Two days later, a man was found dead inside the Occupy Salt Lake City encampment. While there is no evidence that any of the deaths was the result of violence by protestors, media and police had for several weeks been depicting occupations as increasingly dangerous and disorderly, and the deaths were used as an excuse for immediate aggressive evictions.

Just a few days later, around 1am on November 15, Zuccotti Park was cleared. The eviction was something of a surprise attack, and the few people who actually witnessed police preparations counted “1000 riot gear cops bout to pull sneak attack,” as Questlove, the well-known drummer of hip hop group The Roots, improbably tweeted to his nearly two million followers. There are few other accounts from the raid outside,

as media was actively barred from entering the zone by the NYPD. However, a great number of Occupiers give accounts of extreme police brutality during the action. Afterward, Mayor Bloomberg released the following statement:

No right is absolute and with every right comes responsibilities. The First Amendment gives every New Yorker the right to speak out—but it does not give anyone the right to sleep in a park or otherwise take it over to the exclusion of others—nor does it permit anyone in our society to live outside the law. There is no ambiguity in the law here—the First Amendment protects speech—it does not protect the use of tents and sleeping bags to take over a public space.

What responsibility Bloomberg was referring to is not clear, but the statement amounted to a crude and cynical defense, given the clear violation of constitutional rights not just of freedom of speech but also of assembly and of the press.

Two days later, OWS protested the eviction and celebrated its two-month anniversary with a march of at least 30,000 through Downtown

⁸ Hedges’ piece originally appeared in truthdig.com on February 6, 2012. Graeber’s response appeared on February 9 in *n+1*, among other places. An interesting attempt to find middle ground was provided by Bhaskar Sunkara in *Dissent* on February 10.

Manhattan. While a number of “flash” occupations were attempted, none was successful. With Zuccotti Park cleared and winter fast approaching, most other surviving occupations quickly ran out of steam and either disbanded or were forced to close by municipal police. Oakland Mayor Jean Quan, herself a former activist, later admitted to the BBC that she had taken part in a conference call with mayors from 18 other U.S. cities to discuss and coordinate evictions.⁹

Through December and early January there were a number of attempts to re-occupy, both Zuccotti Park and other sites throughout the city and country. However, the majority of these attempts were relatively small, and all were met with immediate police repression, including about 50 people arrested on December 17, the occupation’s three-month anniversary, and 68 arrested at Zuccotti Park on January 1. Whereas police violence had previously led to public outrage and helped to galvanize the movement, the tactic of also repressing journalists seemed to be succeeding in keeping this violence out of the news, and the mainstream public had begun to turn elsewhere.

In early January Zuccotti Park finally reopened and hundreds of protesters streamed back in.

The new rule, set by the owners of the space in conjunction with the city, was that people were not allowed to lie down or sleep in the park. Police presence remained very high to enforce this decision. Though minor skirmishes broke out when some protestors tried to violate the new rules, there was no sustained attempt to re-occupy the space.

While there were few other high profile actions over the course of that winter, the movement was anything but idle. Working and affinity groups across the country were meeting at a feverish pace, continuing to develop a wide array of plans for renewed protest activity in the spring. Despite the brutality of the evictions, the movement tended toward high self-esteem during this time. Many organizers had long been considering the difficulty of maintaining large-scale occupations during the winter. As such, the November evictions did not feel so much like a defeat as an enforced pause between two phases of a still fast-growing movement. However, as winter began to transition to spring and the media freeze-out of Occupy continued, the energies of protestors began to splinter, and doubts grew concerning the shape of the next phase of OWS.

How to Occupy Without an Occupation

March 17, which would mark the six-month anniversary of the occupation of Zuccotti Park, had long been tagged as the spring awakening of the OWS movement. Many working groups used the day as a kick-off event for their summers’ plans. A number of sizeable actions were held, but it was again evident that energy had become diffused without the shared symbol of holding

Zuccotti, and none approached the protests of September-November in size or mainstream attention. Attempts to occupy new public spaces were sporadic, generally lacking in conviction, and emphatically put down by the authorities. More generally, this police repression, with hundreds arrested on the day, made clear that the state was not going to permit a repeat of the fall. A number of Occupiers and organizers had of course warned of this, but in the cacophonous

⁹ Reported, among other places, in the November 15, 2011, edition of Business Insider.

diversity of tactics and ideas, there seemed to be a general difficulty in pivoting away from the idea of occupations as the centripetal force of the movement. The result was something of a surprise, leading to a general sense of consternation among many protestors who had been expecting Occupy to pick up right where it left off in November. After all, what is Occupy Wall Street without an occupation?

A May 1 follow-up, intended as a general strike in the spirit of the international workers' holiday May Day, brought out OWS sympathizers in a number of cities throughout the U.S. In New York alone, tens of thousands of people from across the left spectrum marched together down the length of Broadway. The day's events, however, were barely covered even in the local New York press, let alone on a national scale. The mainstream media, which had gone from ignoring to questioning to vilifying the movement in preceding months, seemed to have settled on the silent treatment, much as it had in other protest movements in decades past. The day's activities were largely judged, even by many supporters of OWS, to have been a disappointment, with organizers having made big promises of nationwide strikes but failing to shut down any city in a meaningful way. May Day faded to May 2, and protestors were left with the increasingly nagging question about what happens when a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it.

Since May Day, it has become clear to most if not all that Occupy needs to evolve. As might be expected, this recognition has led to a number of varying directions, most of which have indeed existed since the earliest days of Occupy and which typically overlap, sharing features and adherents.

The most geographically rooted direction taken by OWS sympathizers has been toward focused support in particular communities. In New York, for example, there exists an Occupy Harlem, Occupy the Bronx, and even an Occupy Sunset

Park¹⁰, to name just a few. In each case, dedicated activists—typically residents of the neighborhood but also supported by hardcore Occupiers—have staged smaller “town squares” and “pop-up occupations” to educate other residents and provide support for community problems. In a recent town square meeting in Sunset Park, for example, several dozen activists held a daytime event that included free food, book giveaways, an art corner for children, and a theater performance focusing on renters' rights. The event concluded with a march to support a rent strike being conducted by mostly Latino residents to protest an abusive landlord.

There has also been increased commitment to a number of issue-based campaigns that extend beyond a single neighborhood but are still rooted in a geographically contiguous area. Within this trend there are diverging tendencies toward more reform-based or electoral action—often-times working more closely with pre-existing left institutions—and more radical protests aimed broadly against a broken system and typically anathema to working from within it. An example of this, which has additionally included these many diverging tendencies, has been OWS support for protests against New York City's “stop and frisk” policy, in which hundreds of thousands of predominantly African American and Latino men are stopped and searched on a prejudicial basis and without due cause.¹¹

Still other trends embed themselves in communities and the broader society in even more complex ways. There have been a number of efforts, for example, to create producer, consumer, and worker cooperatives, time banks, shared gardens, and bicycle collectives, to name a few. To varying degrees, these groups can simultaneously exist as extensions of OWS, members of the community in which they are

10 A historically Latino neighborhood in Brooklyn that has recently seen a large influx of East Asian immigrants.

11 In fact, in New York City last year more young black men were frisked than are actually residents of the city (as quoted in Huffington Post, May 15, 2012).

based, entrepreneurial participants in the market economy, and allies in a loose network of groups seeking to reproduce Zuccotti values in such a way as to sustain themselves and nurture the broader society in which they live.

Yet another tendency has been toward nationwide campaigns against particular issues seen as most indicative of the perversions of the broader system. Two examples have been efforts to reclaim foreclosed homes and attempts to orient the movement more toward a protest of debt. The former, while obviously rooted in a physical locale in its most immediate expression, is tied to a broader critique of a dark trend come to light in the 2008 economic crisis, when subprime mortgages went south and banks began to foreclose on working families at an astonishing rate. Occupy Our Homes ties the issue to a broader critique of predatory financial practices, as well as crisis of homelessness, pointing out that there are currently more empty homes than homeless people in the United States.

The latter, to focus OWS energies on issues of debt, is in many ways the broadest and least geographically specific of the major tendencies of the movement in recent months. Strike Debt seeks to unite issues of credit card debt (around \$800 billion in the U.S.), student debt (a shocking \$1 trillion), mortgage debt, loan sharks and other institutions that target the poor (banks included), and even municipal debt, which is provoking cri-

ses in local governments across America. Coexisting within this tendency are calls for favorable debt restructurings, full forgiveness, more aggressive actions such as debt strikes, and other particularities focusing on the roles of individual institutions in any of these different crises (actions against Bank of America, for example).

Approaching the first anniversary of the occupation of Zuccotti Park, many of these diverging tendencies began coming together to plan a weekend of events and actions. In the weekend before September 17, hundreds gathered to plan Wall Street actions for the coming Monday, as well as to reflect on the past year and celebrate all they had accomplished. That Monday, somewhere between one and three thousand people participated in coordinated protest actions throughout Manhattan's financial district. By most accounts the demonstration was successful, displaying a greater maturity and also benefitting from revised expectations after the May Day disappointment. Police presence was heavy, and nearly 200 arrests of almost entirely non-violent protestors confirmed that the movement remained something of an existential threat to the city's established order. However, the attendance of a couple thousand people to an event that had been advertised as national in reach, also confirmed that as a defined entity Occupy Wall Street was no longer the same force that it had been during the occupations of the previous fall.

How and Why It Happened

So what do we know for sure about Occupy Wall Street? How and why did it come to pass, and what impact has it thus far had on United States politics, economics or culture? The question is a treacherous one, as we remain so close to its happening, still in it really, wan-

dering through the fog of history-in-the-making. Or to quote Nathan Schneider¹²: "Instead, the eager pundits rush to tell us exactly what

¹² From the article "God Dissolves into the Occupy Movement," published October 16, 2011, in the online journal Religious Dispatches.

is happening here. Tom Hayden is right to be pleading for people to 'just let it breathe' in the world-historical delivery room for a little bit."

At this juncture it would seem that the factor we can most certainly identify in explaining the spread of Occupy is the role of the Internet, social media, and other alternative media platforms. The title from earlier in this piece, "OWS Goes Viral," can be used to describe not just the police mace video but the broader nature of the movement's spread: indeed, Occupy spread out of New York's Zuccotti Park much as the year's hottest YouTube video would. People with no previous relationship to any conscious "Left" found themselves clicking on Facebook posts and searching for updates on what had happened the night before. Many who did have prior left tendencies or affiliations were of course also hooked, and the suddenly rich, dense, and variegated online presence of Occupy enhanced the sense that something large and important was happening not just on- but also off-line, out there in the real world.

At this point there emerged a harmonious dialectic between, on the one hand, new technology and social media and, on the other, the "permanent" physical presence and open spaces of the first occupations. Zuccotti Park went viral, leading to the creation of new occupations, which then used "new technology"¹³ both to organize their own manifestations and also to join the virtual Occupy community, further growing the movement's visibility and encouraging still new occupations, and so forth. Crucially, this manner of diffusion allowed OWS to arrive at an amazing speed to an unprecedented number of cities and towns across the United States, many of which had not experienced sustained protest in decades.

¹³ Twitter, Facebook, and alternative blogs, news sites, and media platforms, greatly facilitated by the prevalence of smartphones and tablets.

While the dialectic that enabled this goes some way toward describing *how* the occupations spread so quickly, it does not fully explain *why*.

The first, most obvious answer is the increasingly visible deterioration of the U.S. economic-political realm in recent years. The Bush years represented a dark period in U.S. history, particularly in the eyes of the country's political Left. It began with a stolen election, followed by a shocking act of terrorism on American soil, the imposition of invasive, shadowy security measures, extradition, torture and unlimited detention, the demonization of Muslims, official lies and bloody wars of conquest; while back in the U.S. there were pardons for gross corporate malfeasance, skyrocketing inequality and poverty, the shocking destruction and official flippancy surrounding Hurricane Katrina, and finally, after years of tepid growth based on financial speculation and exploitation of the poor, the outbreak of the worst economic crisis since 1929, with outright Armageddon only prevented, or so we were told, by a public bail-out of the finance sector that went far beyond the scope of anything seen in world history. Following the economic boom of the 1990s, in which U.S. citizen had been able to momentarily regain belief in our uniqueness, never-ending prosperity, and other trappings of the American Dream, the 2000s brought us crashing down into the realization that we were a country in precipitous decline.

Amidst this chaos and destruction Obama emerged in 2008 with a message of hope and change that galvanized many, particularly young voters and people of color who understandably wanted to believe that the brilliant young politician could undo the damage that Bush had wrought. While Obama has no doubt been better than Bush according to all but the most orthodox or disaffected Left, his sweeping promises of change have also given way to the bitter realities of a dysfunctional political system: the continuation of Guantanamo and Afghanistan, the esca-

lation of drone attacks killing civilians, more financial bailouts without sufficient accountability or restrictions, increasingly outrageous finance scandals left unpunished, and continuing growth in income disparity in the face of double-digit unemployment,¹⁴ with one in three Americans living in or near poverty. In the bitter disappointment of “business as usual,” amidst the very real and growing pain of a large portion of the U.S. population, can be seen the seeds of discontent that came to blossom in OWS.

However, the state of the U.S. political-economic system has long been a source of discontent and criticism for many on the Left, as well as many of the groups prominent in Occupy. And in fact, despite little culture of protest in the U.S. mainstream, under the surface there had been a good deal of activity in past decades. Even just looking back to earlier in 2011, the restriction of collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin had led to protests of 200,000 people, including an occupation of the State Capitol building in Madison.¹⁵ In the decade before, there had been at least a dozen instances of one-day protests of hundreds of thousands of people, much larger than anything OWS did on any single day.

Reaching a little further back, in terms of militancy and commitment the anti-globalization protests of the 1990s measured right up there with OWS. The so-called Battle in Seattle during the World Trade Organization’s Ministerial Conference in 1999 drew between 50,000 and 100,000 protestors, effectively shutting down the conference in spite of large-scale police repression, with 600 arrested, thousands more injured, and a declaration of the municipal equivalent of martial law by the mayor.

Many leading figures in OWS had participated in and learned from these past events, meaning that OWS did actually have an accumulated foundation of knowledge from which to grow. However, the vast majority of Americans (led by an unsympathetic, status quo press) either never found out about these protests or was able to brush them aside and say: “This is about some other thing, happening somewhere else—this doesn’t have anything to do to me.”

The most important clue toward understanding why OWS spread so quickly can be found in the structure and content of its first occupations. From the first day of Zuccotti Park’s occupation, protestors dedicated an unusual amount of their energy to “process:” how to build a true participatory democracy, how to encourage meaningful inclusiveness, how to reimagine group dynamics and ways of interacting with each other. Through this process (and simultaneously because of it), the first occupations also reached consensus decisions to eschew any and all hierarchical structures, centralized leadership, or prioritization of demands. As has been discussed earlier in this piece, the first occupations were set up as big tents to which all were invited to join and participate.

Generally speaking, the earliest proponents of this focus were people with anarchist sympathies. While certain processes associated with this thought (consensus decision-making, for example) had long been present in many progressive institutions, more broadly anarchism had long been deeply subaltern even within the U.S. Left and not at all present in mainstream political discourse. One effect of this was that groups and individuals with more explicitly anarchist politics had been largely spared the ideological attacks of capitalism and, partially as a result of their marginalization, had not been forced to fight the demoralizing defensive battles of the socialist Left.

¹⁴ This figure is much debated. Official unemployment, for example, hovers around 8%, though notably does not include the chronically underemployed, those who have stopped looking for work, or undocumented people; many economists place “real” unemployment above 15%.

¹⁵ See John Nichols, *To Begin the World Over Again: A Politics of Wisconsin, Occupy, and the Next Left*, October 2012, www.rosalux-nyc.org.

As such, this sudden visibility of anarchist thought hit many people across the United States like a breath of fresh air. Outside of a few core activists, the first people impacted were largely the young, a group long drawn to the utopian elements of some anarchist thought (and also the most plugged in to the social media through which OWS was being disseminated). What was happening looked so entirely different from the left actions and ideas that they had previously known. It did not carry the same baggage of

sectarianism and defeat with which so much of this Left had been saddled.¹⁶ This same breath of fresh air also hit members of the “old Left,” many of whom were skeptical or critical in the first weeks but gradually found their space within this ever-growing, all-accepting tent. The result was a breadth of participants and sympathizers—within the left spectrum but also in the general public—united in a way that felt totally fresh, important, and also fun, which is not something to be underestimated.

The Impact of Occupy

At this juncture we see that the reasons *why* OWS was so successful overlap significantly with what its impact has been. Much of its success emerged from the extent to which it opened spaces (physical and symbolic) for exchanges and discourse all across the left spectrum and more broadly in the United States. This should also be considered a major accomplishment of Occupy to this point. On the Left, OWS created a space where diverse and divided sectors—from unions to immigrant groups to radical youth, anarchists and socialists, and also including the “Democrat” Left—could come together and begin to heal, or at least confront, their longstanding differences.¹⁷

In terms of the broader impact on the American public, millions of people across the country—instead of saying “this doesn’t have to do with me”—were forced to look into the face of protest and think: “I’m not entirely sure what this is about, but it seems to be everywhere, and it may or may not have something to do with me.” The result, as has been discussed earlier, was that millions of Americans were exposed to a greater level of protest than they had ever

before known. Eighteen year olds from traditional, conservative families in rural Texas, to take a simple example, may never have found out about Wisconsin or heard of the Battle in Seattle, but came face to face with Occupy Wall Street; and many found something in it that they liked. Much as the alter-globalization movement had provided invaluable instruction to its participants in organization and protest tactics, OWS has served as a school for a whole generation of young activists across the country.

On a related note, and already discussed as a principal component in the movement’s spread, OWS also forged new horizons in the U.S. for the possibilities of political action through social media and the blog-o-verse. The Obama campaign in 2008 had already done this very effectively, but based around an election and very much within the range of political actions considered acceptable by the status quo. OWS broke through this shroud of acceptability in a massive and meaningful way. The first occupation in New York was quickly able to reach millions of people, particularly

¹⁷ See Mike Davis, “No More Bubblegum,” October 21, 2011, Los Angeles Review of Books.

¹⁶ See Ethan Young, *Assessing the Left: Progressive Politics in the United States*, November 2012, www.rosalux-nyc.org.

of a younger generation, who increasingly live their social lives through platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. These same platforms also facilitated subsequent coordination and provided spaces for geographically distant Occupiers to cultivate feelings of connectedness and solidarity. In some ways this resembled what happened in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab Spring of 2011, but its full-fledged introduction in the United States—a country of great geographical distance and low political engagement—certainly qualifies the phenomenon as meaningful and impactful in American culture.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative and oftentimes limited media coverage, Occupy Wall Street also had a major impact on U.S. public discourse. Its most obvious contribution in this regard has been the “we are the 99 %” formulation, which drew attention to how 1 % of the population has reaped the vast majority of economic benefits in the past decades. This clear denunciation of the country’s economic elite spread like wildfire through the United States, tapping into underlying angers across a wide spectrum of the population. Importantly, it at least momentarily placed the primary architects of unfettered neoliberalism squarely into

public crosshairs. Even more crucially, as stated by Graeber: “The idea of the ‘99 percent’ managed to do something that no one has done in the United States since the Great Depression: revive the concept of social class as a political issue.”¹⁸ Even the Democratic Party machine tapped into the language (if not using the exact words), pushing an economic populist line that has helped Obama and a host of Senate candidates through to victory in the November 2012 elections.

In summary, Occupy Wall Street has impacted U.S. society in how it spread—via new media and the physical open spaces it nurtured; why it spread—articulating a potent critique against a flawed electoral system and introducing to the mainstream a fresh form of political engagement; and also how it consequently brought together a splintered Left, engaged a young generation of activists and got the attention of a broader public not used to thinking about protest. The result has been a unique phenomenon in U.S. history. It has not been the largest nor most sustained protest, nor anywhere near the most successful in terms of concrete gains, but it has sent a cultural shockwave through the United States that will be felt for years and perhaps take decades to cure.

The Future of Occupy

Despite this impact, we may surmise that Occupy as a delineated, well-defined phenomenon burned bright and short in its initial phase and has been in a generalized state of decline ever since Zuccotti Park was cleared. At this juncture it appears that OWS will not return in the same way or with the same force as it did in September 2011.

Some progressives, for example Dissent Editor Michael Walzer, argue that OWS needs to take on the form of a more traditional social movement, setting a clear goal and then organizing large numbers of the people who stand to benefit from that goal. Indeed, while Occupy’s early

¹⁸ See David Graeber, “Can Debt Spark a Revolution?” *The Nation*, September 24, 2012.

anarchist orientation was crucial to its success, the leaderless, demand-shy movement now struggles to offer fresh ways to sustain protest going forward.¹⁹

Others like David Harvey argue that as people continue crowding into cities around the world, 21st century movements will be increasingly driven by the contestation of urban space, as opposed to a mobilized proletariat, or any other single group for that matter.²⁰ In its successful strategy of occupying visible urban space, OWS fits this view, creating a dense network of what Hakim Bey has described as temporary autonomous zones.²¹ Meanwhile, Uruguayan theorist Raúl Zibechi documents a decades-long trend in South America in the same direction, away from more traditional social movements and towards what he calls “societies in movement,” where poor and exploited groups take some control over a physical territory and use that space to build a little world that better meets their needs.²²

Each of these analyses has some bearing on the future of Occupy. It is indeed likely that the movement marks a watershed in terms of how people will organize themselves in the future, the structures their protests will take, and also the language they will use to articulate their grievances. OWS has stretched the boundaries and in some ways redefined what U.S. protest can look like, and its impact will continue to shape the “next Left” well into the 21st century. However, at the same time there are other progressive traditions that OWS cannot do without. While it politicized a whole generation in ways not conceivable two years earlier, since last

year’s evictions it has struggled to maintain its momentum and simultaneously pivot towards effective new expressions of dissent. Now that the movement, at least in its first articulation, has passed its zenith, the question of how to continue is of utmost importance. This is where the traditions of the more organized and institutionalized Left can prove valuable, because without the structures and strategies to better sustain this explosion of activism, well-organized opponents of change will certainly prevail, and the energy created by the movement will gradually dissipate.

In order to look forward, we do well to think of Rosa Luxemburg’s *Dialectic of Spontaneity and Organization*. A period of intense spontaneity has subsided, and now groups born from that spontaneity must go about the hard and little appreciated work of sustaining themselves, and by extension the protest, in the longer term. While it is difficult to know how or when the next period of spontaneity will arise, there have been positive signs regarding the movement’s ability to mature, from increasing collaboration with groups in low-income neighborhoods, to the consolidation of support for Strike Debt, to strong leadership in disaster relief missions in the wake of the devastating Hurricane Sandy.²³

These recent efforts also serve to remind us of what might actually be Occupy’s principal lesson: that to overcome the challenges of our time we need new forms of organization that are flexible, engaging, democratic, and fun. And we must support these new organizational forms, to give them the strength to persevere, thrive, and eventually provide the foundation for another period of spontaneity that will further the cause of justice in fresh, exciting, and unexpected ways.

19 From the article “Social Movements and Election Campaigns” in the Summer 2012 edition of *Dissent*.

20 In “Deploying Urban Space” by Maggie Garb. Published May 31, 2012, in *In These Times*.

21 From “The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism” (1985). Available on Bey’s website at hermetic.com.

22 Articulated, amongst other places, in “Territorios en Resistencia” (2009).

23 For which OWS has received widespread praise, including from the *New York Times* (in “Occupy Sandy: A Movement Moves to Relief,” by Alan Feuer, November 9, 2012).

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