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What 'diversity of tactics' really means for Occupy Wall Street

by Nathan Schneider | October 19, 2011, 12:02 pm

Occupy Wall Street marchers watch from the pedestrian walkway as hundreds of their comrades take to the roadway of the Brooklyn Bridge on October 1.

Even as Occupy Wall Street shapes the public conversation about high finance, political corruption, and the distribution of wealth, it has also raised anew questions about how resistance movements in general should operate. I want to consider one of the matters that I've thought about a lot over the past month while watching the occupation and its means of making its presence felt on the streets of New York and in the media.

"Diversity of tactics," in the context of political protests, is often treated as essentially a byword for condoning acts of violence. The phrase comes by this honestly; it emerged about a decade ago at the height of the global justice movement, especially between the 1999 demonstrations that shut down a WTO meeting in Seattle and those two years later in Quebec. While all nonviolent movements worth their salt will inevitably rely on a *variety* of tactics—for instance, Gene Sharp's list of 198 of them—using the word "diversity" was a kind of attempted détente between those committed to staying nonviolent and those who weren't.

Consider this characterization by George Lakey:

> "Diversity of tactics" implies that some protesters may choose to do actions that will be interpreted by the majority of people as "violent," like property destruction, attacks on police vehicles, fighting back if provoked by the police,

> and so on, while other protesters are operating with clear nonviolent guidelines.

Those who extoll the importance of total nonviolent discipline—as Lakey eloquently goes on to do—might be disappointed to learn that Occupy Wall Street has made "diversity of tactics" its official modus operandi. However, the way that the occupiers have carried out this policy might actually lead us to think of its meaning and implications in a more compelling way.

Since the early stages of the movement, it is true, those taking part have been in a deadlock on the question of making a commitment to nonviolence. At a planning meeting in Tompkins Square Park prior to September 17, I recall one young man in dark sunglasses saying, knowingly, "There is a danger of fetishizing nonviolence to the point that it becomes a dogma." In response, a woman added a "point of information," despite being in contradiction to what Gandhi or King might say: "Nonviolence just means not *initiating* violence." The question of nonviolence was ultimately tabled that night and thereafter. "This discussion is a complete waste of time," someone concluded.

Property damage and self-defense, therefore, have remained on the table. The main points of the march guidelines subsequently promulgated by the occupation's Direct Action Committee are these:

> 1. Stay together and KEEP MOVING!
> 2. Don't instigate cops or pedestrians with physical violence.
> 3. Use basic hand signals.
> 4. Empowered pace keeps at the front, back and middle of every march. These folks are empowered to make directional decisions and guide the march.
> 5. We respect diversity of tactics, but consider how our actions may affect the entire group.

In practice, however, the occupiers have kept nonviolent discipline quite well, even if they don't entirely preach it. Their self-defense against police violence has been mainly with cameras, not physical force. (In fact, they have often responded to intimidation by chanting, "*This! Is! A Nonviolent Protest!*&rdqo;) There have been no cases of intentional property destruction that I know of. One reason for this is surely common sense; when facing an essentially paramilitary institution like the NYPD, there's little hope that a few hundred or a few thousand protesters could stand much of a chance with violence. Another reason is the point made in the second clause of guideline 5, qualifying the "diversity of tactics": an act of violence, the occupiers realize, would reflect on everyone in the movement, the vast majority of whose participants would not condone it.

So far, at least, what "diversity of tactics" has meant to the occupiers is not simply openness to violence but actually a richer interpretation of the phrase—indeed, a whole philosophy of direct action that comes out of anarchist thought. In this, "diversity of tactics" shares the same heritage and logic of the open assemblies that are the heart of the occupation movement. Take this passage from a pamphlet on hand at occupied Liberty Plaza, *Anarchist Basics*:

> Affinity groups ["of 5 to 20 people"] decide on their own what they want to do and how they want to do it, and aren't obliged to take orders from any person on top. As such, they challenge top-down decision-making and organizing, and empower those involved to take direct action in the world around them. Affinity groups can make decisions in whatever way they see fit, but they generally use

> some form of consensus or direct democracy to decide on goals and tactics. Affinity groups by nature are decentralized and non-hierarchical, two important principles of anarchist organizing and action.

Small groups acting more or less autonomously toward common goals is a matter of principle as well as of pragmatism. These groups, in turn, can voluntarily coordinate with each other in spokescouncils. Operating this way reflects the kind of values that many in the occupation movement insist on: individual autonomy, consensus decision making, decentralization, and equality.

"For us to go around and police everyone in the march is not respecting their way of expressing how they're participating in this movement or this action," says Sandy Nurse of Occupy Wall Street's Direct Action Committee. She is describing a philosophy of organizing, primarily; violence and forms of property destruction are, at best, secondary to this approach, and they're not really necessary for it to be practiced effectively.

Consider, for instance, the two main events which brought public attention and sympathy to the movement: the arrest of nearly 100 on a march near Union Square on September 24 (which included an infamous pepper-spraying incident), and the approximately 700 arrested a week later on the Brooklyn Bridge. 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. (At Union Square, there was a dispute about whether to take the march back to Liberty Plaza or to the United Nations; at the Brooklyn Bridge, hundreds of marchers chose to spill onto the roadway rather than remaining on the narrow pedestrian walkway.) In both cases, too, the police responded to such autonomous action with violent overreaction, which in turn garnered tremendous interest from the media.

I have previously called for the movement to adopt more orderly kinds of civil disobedience actions, ones targeted specifically at the laws they oppose—on the model of lunch-counter sit-ins in the civil rights movement, for instance. However, I've been forced to recognize that the chaotic stuff seems to work.

My sense of the dynamics at play here is something like the following. The NYPD, as a hierarchical, highly-structured organization, operates according to certain plans and procedures arranged in advance. Its commanders gain the best intelligence they can about what protesters intend to do and act accordingly. When the protesters act outside the plans police prepared for, or their plans aren't unified, the police feel they have no choice but to resort to a violent crackdown, which in turn highlights the protesters' own nonviolence in the media reports, and their movement grows. The net effect is that it almost seems as if the police are intentionally trying to help the movement, for that's what their every action seems to do.

We already know that power structures which rely on violence are helpless against coordinated nonviolent action. During the civil rights movement, a highly structured and disciplined action in a segregated city like a sit-in or Freedom Ride had the capacity to confront the system in a very direct way, presenting the powerful a dilemma between violent overreaction and capitulation. Such actions, however, have since turned ritualized and generally ineffective in American protest movements. But Occupy Wall Street commends to us the anarchist insight that, in much the same way, hierarchical command structures are highly vulnerable to non-hierarchical action.

If this is true, the real strength of the 1999 Seattle WTO mobilization was not so much the particular tactics used—least of all the window-breaking antics of "black blocs"—but the decentralized way in which activists organized and deployed them. (A subsequent RAND Corporation study on what it called "swarming" made note of this.) Wrote nonviolence trainer Betsy Raasch-Hilman, in mid-2000:

> In terms of numbers, many demonstrations have been larger than the actions in Seattle. The difference between the WTO protests and the Million Man March on Washington, D.C., (for example) was that people did not all do the same thing at the same time in Seattle. Spontaneity ruled the day(s). As in the physics of chaos, seemingly random events emerged into a pattern, and almost as quickly dissolved into a less-identifiable pattern.

A major reason why traditional forms of civil disobedience aren't well-suited to Occupy Wall Street is the fact that the occupiers aren't even capable of breaking the relevant laws in the first place. While those in the civil rights movement could sit in the wrong part of a segregated bus, the occupiers at Liberty Plaza can't exactly flout campaign finance laws, or laws regarding the regulation of banks. Such laws are simply beyond the reach of most Americans—which is exactly the problem. Consequently, the movement is being forced to resort not to civil disobedience but to what political scientist Bernard Harcourt has proposed we call "political disobedience":

> Civil disobedience accepted the legitimacy of political institutions, but resisted the moral authority of resulting laws. Political disobedience, by contrast, resists the very way in which we are governed: it resists the structure of partisan politics, the demand for policy reforms, the call for party identification, and the very ideologies that dominated the post-War period.

Diversity of tactics is a form of political disobedience par excellence, as its emphasis on autonomy rather than authority represents a direct contradiction to the kind of order that ordinary politics presupposes.

This idea takes on a further dimension as Occupy Wall Street expands from a single action to a nationwide occupation movement. There is perhaps no better case in point than in Washington, D.C., where there are currently two dueling occupations underway—one that's mainly young people practicing the non-hierarchical ideal of Liberty Plaza, and another, organized by a group of older activists for months in advance, which began with a somewhat more structured decision-making process. They're located at McPherson Square and Freedom Plaza, respectively. Both consider themselves to be part of the occupation movement, though, as has been rather exaggerated in some media reports, they're not always on exactly the same page.

The occupation at Freedom Plaza, for instance, has focused on more traditional disobedience actions with purposeful targets, such as the Hart Senate Office Building and the Supreme Court. Those at McPherson, on the other hand, have used more generally disruptive tactics like blocking traffic during commutes. Together, though, and in different ways, they contribute to a net effect of making the Nation's Capital feel "occupied." While some have argued that Freedom Plaza is an aberration to the movement as a whole, it is probably best understood as having a legitimate place in a movement that employs a diversity of tactics. Those at Freedom Plaza, moreover, have explicitly stressed a commitment to resisting nonviolently.

If it is true, as I've come to think, that a diversity of tactics has been

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meaningfully practiced by the occupation movement even while remaining nonviolent, then a definition of the phrase like George Lakey's is in need of revision. Rather than being merely a license to use violence, respecting a diversity of tactics is in its own right a robust approach to conducting resistance —and one that is arguably all the more powerful when it remains nonviolent. This was highlighted in the part of Naomi Klein's recent speech at Liberty Plaza that earned the loudest applause:

> Something else this movement is doing right: You have committed yourselves to non-violence. You have refused to give the media the images of broken windows and street fights it craves so desperately. And that tremendous discipline has meant that, again and again, the story has been the disgraceful and unprovoked police brutality. … Meanwhile, support for this movement grows and grows. More wisdom.

The data seem to support her. A widely-cited Freedom House report from 2005 found that movements which rely on nonviolent methods are considerably more likely to result in democratic outcomes, rather than simply replacing one authoritarianism with another. This, especially, should carry weight for the occupation movement, which strives so much to embody the ideals of a more democratic society in the means it uses to achieve one. If a permissive attitude toward violence is not a feature of the world one is working for, nor should it be welcomed in one's movement. Activist and writer Starhawk, who has been doing nonviolence trainings at Freedom Plaza, also notes that a commitment to nonviolence reduces the need for "security culture" among organizers and fosters transparency.

Erica Chenoweth and Kurt Schock have found through statistical studies that the effects of having a so-called "radical flank" in a resistance movement—having a violent minority—include a slightly lower success rate and a significantly lower level of public involvement. Canadian activists Philippe Duhamel and David Martin recognize this in their call for "a diversity of nonviolent tactics." They argue that "some tactics don't mix"; once violence enters the picture, it monopolizes the landscape of the conflict, co-opting other tactics and alienating potential participants. Rather than representing a true "diversity," actions that people perceive as violent monopolizes public attention and lends sympathy to the agents of repression. This certainly was the case this past weekend, when a small number of people doing property destruction in Rome caused headlines like "Protests Turn Violent" to dominate the perception of an overwhelmingly nonviolent day of action in cities all over the world.

Only a month into the occupation, and less than three months since planning began in earnest, Occupy Wall Street is just beginning to have the robust affinity groups that a diversity of tactics approach requires. Such groups have led targeted actions like the disruption of a Sotheby's auction and a sit-in at a JPMorgan Chase bank branch. It is tactics like these—rather than mass arrests for obstructing traffic—that will begin to directly undermine the legitimacy of the powers the occupiers seek to target. And when causing such disruptions, remaining nonviolent will be crucial to ensuring that the disrupters keep their own legitimacy in the public eye.

The committee responsible for media relations for Occupy Wall Street has already begun preparing messaging—down to specific tweets—to use in case someone in the movement ends up using violence. (When tensions escalate during confrontations with the police, one sometimes sees a few protesters coming very close to the precipice.) Even those in the committee who aren't ultimately opposed to violence in principle recognize that such acts would be a serious challenge to the movement's credibility, both in the media and among those taking part in it. Given the commitment to a diversity of tactics, though, just about anything can happen, and the committee often learns about it only after the fact.

Let's hope those tweets go unneeded.

Posted under Anarchism, Corporations, Democratic reform, History, Journalism, March, Occupations, Protests, Sit-ins, Theory, United States

12 Comments

Jack DuVall says:
October 19, 2011 at 9:50 pm (Edit)

This article is a very useful exploration of the potential value and known risks of different forms of tactical action in a movement. I'd just like to suggest two clarifications.

First, if "coordinated nonviolent action" as in the civil rights movement has "since turned ritualized and generally ineffective in American protest movements," that is not because something is intrinsically wrong with it. If civil resistance hasn't worked effectively lately in the U.S., it's more likely because it hasn't being planned and carried out strategically and in a highly disciplined way. Dismissing nonviolent action as a "ritual" may be a justification for refusing to embrace nonviolent discipline, but the latter is necessary for strategic reasons, as the article acknowledges: to win the contest of legitimacy with power-holders who will inevitably use repression of some kind when it appears they may lose control of the immediate conflict.

Most movements start to notch victories only after an unjust authority's use of violence backfires, and the general public turns against it. You can't win that public contest if you're using violence too — as Naomi Klein inferred in the statement quoted above. That's why it's not a good idea to be euphemistic about violent tactics, by suggesting they may fall within some vague notion of a "diversity of tactics." You can call violence a form of "diversity" in order to distract people from its costs and risks, but that doesn't prevent it from contaminating both the public reaction to and the strategic potential of a movement.

Second, modern anarchists didn't invent the idea of distributed disruptive action, which is another way to describe the appearance of chaos. It's been around at least since the Germans learned how to fend off Roman invasions, almost 2,000 years ago. But it isn't "chaos" except in the eye of the beholder. It's a form of seeing the pattern of how authorities are likely to respond to actions that challenge their control of events, so as to surprise them both in spatial and tactical ways.

The ultimate object of this is to overstretch an opponent's resources and capacity to maintain the status quo — so that its own supporters and enforcers begin to doubt whether the existing system can be operated satisfactorily for very long. No oppressive or abusive system which is opposed by a popular, civilian-based movement is forever implacable; those who defend the system can lose their morale (or even resign or defect) as readily as that can happen to a movement, prompting the opponent to stand down or settle on terms advantageous to the people. The challenge for a movement is how to plan, innovate and sequence tactics so as to force that result.

Reply to this comment

Nathan Schneider says:
October 19, 2011 at 10:09 pm (Edit)

Thanks—these are two really great points!

You're definitely right that "coordinated nonviolent action" is not in some sense passe… I didn't mean to suggest that somehow its time has come and gone. The Tar Sands Action recently used that model to some effect, for instance, and its organizers are currently planning to escalate that work even further. I certainly don't mean to dismiss "nonviolent action" in general as "ritual"—just the forms it has sometimes taken when it is practiced in a purely symbolic way that doesn't really present the powers that be with a genuine dilemma, or expose the violence of the system. This doesn't mean it can't be done.

As I suggest, though, it seems to me that the nature of the opponent in question here seems especially suited to a distributed action, since so many of the laws in need of changing are out of reach to individual people. However, OWS also seems to be exploring coordinated mass actions like coordinated withdrawals from banks and account closures—a larger version of what got 20 people arrested last weekend simply for trying to close their accounts. In that case, such orderly nonviolent action apparently did cause a chill to run down the spines of those in authority.

As for the prehistory of chaotic actions—yes, yes! Actually, that RAND report I cited gives quite a bit of the history. And I could go on forever about the simultaneous order and chaos in complex systems; I've written about that, for instance, in a theological context here. Nevertheless, I do credit the anarchists with developing and promulgating a version of this method that is not just a strategic choice but the extension of a comprehensive philosophy. As nonviolent action was for Gandhi, for them, the strategy becomes a way of life. That probably makes the strategy all the more powerful.

Reply to this comment

Nathan Schneider says:
October 19, 2011 at 10:12 pm (Edit)

This sign being held at OWS here seems apropos:

> Warning: Do not confuse the COMPLEXITY of this movement with CHAOS

Reply to this comment

Lestin says:
October 20, 2011 at 5:10 pm (Edit)

I think the decentralized way in which the Occupy movement is coordinated is part of why activists trying to challenge various manifestations of oppression within the movement have been so frustrated. It may also be why I keep hearing such sentiments accompanied by an insistence that there must be leaders, there must be organizers, there must be a committee to critique who can then fix the behavior of the movement.

One alternative avenue for spreading change within a decentralized movement might be to take a local Occupy site and develop a really solid set of anti-oppression practices there, so that people can see a concrete example at work and spread it.

Reply to this comment

Al Giordano says:
October 20, 2011 at 5:16 pm (Edit)

The fact is that although there have been some egregious cases of police violence and brutality, the OWS protest in New York has not faced the kind of all-out police assault (of the type that was averted last week when the city's "cleaning" of the park was cancelled). Hopefully this never happens. But no protest (or movement) should ever mistake hoping for planning.

The use of the term "diversity of tactics" leaves the protest in a very difficult situation if the authorities do, at some point, attempt to clear the park. Many proponents of "direct action" say things like one of your sources said above: "Nonviolence just means not initiating violence." They say that "we're nonviolent until the other side is violent, and then we can defend ourselves."

That is so strategically and tactically wrongheaded, and it is an invitation to disaster. When the State becomes violent, that is the exact moment when nonviolent discipline is most effective and vital! And it is the moment when many protests have lost control of their own destiny when their participants have not adequately agreed and trained themselves in the skills of nonviolence. Adopting a skill like this is no more a "dogma" than learning to, say, text message on a cell phone, or set up a Twitter account! It is just that: a skill that can be learned and taught.

(Just like the Zuccotti Park general assembly's ban on alcohol and drug use in the occupation is not a dogmatic adherence to sobriety: It is simply acknowledging that the protest is more effective with that guideline.)

I fear that this essay bends over too much to try and put lipstick on a pig: Saying "diversity of tactics" is working when, as Dr. House might say, "the patient has not been stressed yet," invites disaster. It emboldens the burnt-out leftovers who want to carry on "the spirit of Seattle 1999″ with their own ritual protest norms and habits and who substitute effective eight-hour nonviolence training sessions with wham-bam-thank-you-mam two-hour "direct action" express trainings that happen so fast that most participants leave not yet knowing what an arraignment is or how to navigate it should they be arrested.

As the weather gets colder (always respect Mother Nature!) and the occupation may thin to a more "hard core" but smaller base of protesters, the percentage of participants who want to work out their authority issues via street battles with the cops are likely to grow as a force in an ever smaller general assembly. Or the authorities may beat them to it and attempt to clear the park at a moment of maximum confusion. It is at that moment when this "diversity of tactics" nonsense may really take all the inspiration and hope around the occupation and wreck it on the altar of a previous failed protest tactic's "feticization of diversity in tactics." I do not think this looming challenge is easily explained away simply because it has not – yet – led to disaster.

Reply to this comment

Nathan Schneider says:
October 20, 2011 at 5:27 pm (Edit)

You're definitely right that the occupation has yet to be tested—even with the mass chemical weapons and rubber bullets employed at Seattle, much less actual prison sentences and actual bullets.

I hear what you're saying, too, about putting lipstick on a pig. But I'm not being entirely descriptive here, obviously—I'm describing what little has happened so far and suggesting a possible extrapolation that would point the way toward a more disciplined approach for the movement, in a way that is practical, nonviolent, and consistent with the values the movement has already espoused.

Thanks for this fantastic comment, Al!

Reply to this comment

Al Giordano says:
October 20, 2011 at 5:43 pm (Edit)

There is a comment above that portrays any friendly critique of tactics of these actions as somehow out of touch with the power of decentralized autonomy in a protest. As you probably know, Nathan, I strongly favor decentralized small-group autonomy, have long practiced it, and am making no argument at all against that. It is simply that over 27 arrests for civil disobedience and so many related experiences one sees a lot of what works, and too much of what hasn't worked.

There is nothing hierarchical about decentralized groups agreeing to a set of guidelines that all will adhere to when working together. That's as horizontal as not doing it. But also in my experience when people use terms like "anti-oppression tactics" very often that's been a euphemism for "hey, let's go fuck shit up with the cops." Caveat Emptor.

Reply to this comment

Dave says:
October 21, 2011 at 3:55 pm (Edit)

Why do “nonviolent” protesters, predominantly on the left, get arrested so much for breaking laws (trespassing, blocking traffic, ect)? The Tea Party protests didn’t. BTW, I do not consider police doing their jobs enforcing the law violent.

The Tea Party has clear focus with libertarian leanings more in tune with America. The OWS is just the opposite. Save the whales, global warming, anti war, Marxists, anarchists, supporters of European style democratic socialism, in short OWS is all over the place. A person in middle America may agree with one idea, but find others repulsive.

The TP effected change thru the electoral process. The OWS protesters run the real risk of damaging politicians sympathetic with their cause. If they really want to effect change, take a shower, take off the lip rings, dress nicely, give money/time to support candidates that believe in the same things (if there aren’t any, offer up one of your own).

Reply to this comment

Nathan Schneider says:
October 21, 2011 at 4:10 pm (Edit)

You raise some interesting points.

I think the concern among OWSers, as well as many in the Tea Party grassroots, is that the electoral process sold the Tea Party out. Many of those at OWS see few or none who represent them in American electoral politics now, so they’ll continue to work outside that framework until that changes. In any case, though, a number of early organizers are anarchists who reject representational modes of politics altogether, and are more interested in creating a movement based on local, grassroots forms of direct democracy.

We’ve actually addressed your aesthetic concerns on this site in the past, though, at the same time, I don’t think those are actually all that relevant.

As far as breaking laws… the Tea Party has occasionally tried to call upon the legacy of Martin Luther King, who was repeatedly arrested for his work. This seems to indicate a recognition among those in that movement that sometimes it is necessary to break laws nonviolently in order to make a point that the laws themselves are unjust.

I’m not sure what “in tune with America” means in this context, especially when OWS is now polling higher than the Tea Party.

Reply to this comment

Donna Schaper says:
October 22, 2011 at 10:23 pm (Edit)

Why we confuse complexity with chaos is easy to understand. The collision of issues is a lot for any one, even the best or brightest, to understand. One thread at a time, with lots of "affinity groups" deciding to do local actions is perfect for dealing with this collision, complexity , both of which feel like chaos and are not.

For example a dozen of us could visit a bank. Another dozen could ask why the supermarket is selling us such bad food. A third dozen could go to Starbucks or Google or Subway and ask for help for the movement. The trick is to charm the cops OUT OF wanting to hurt us. The trick is to help the cops think we are non violent and still dangerous. Where do they have coffee? Let's visit.

Reply to this comment

Kelly says:
October 27, 2011 at 1:14 am (Edit)

As a supporter and firm believer in the power of nonviolent protest, thus far I am proud of the Occupy Wall Street movement. However, I fear the violent minority. As you mentioned, if even a small fraction of the protesters turn to violence it will monopolize the demonstration's public support and effectiveness. How can OWS maintain a nonviolent approach without training and leadership? Is it only a matter of time before this revolution collapses due to the violent acts of a mere few?

Reply to this comment

> **Nathan Schneider** says:
> October 27, 2011 at 1:36 am (Edit)
>
> Training is definitely important. In a violent society like ours, nonviolent action needs to be learned. Fortunately, there are a number of people doing trainings in nonviolence around the country, including at Occupy Wall Street—though so far it has definitely been too little, too late. I hope that improves.
>
> As for leadership, I don't think that having a rigidly hierarchical structure or a charismatic leader is necessary for a successful nonviolent movement, if that's what you mean. (See Mary King's recent post on leaderless movements.) The hope of an organizational structure like at OWS is that, with practice, people can learn to lead themselves, and each other, in suitably-sized groups. It seems to me that the number of more coordinated and disciplined actions in the movement is growing somewhat, which is a good thing.
>
> Reply to this comment

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