Occupy! #4

An OWS-Inspired Gazette

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THE OCCUPY COMMUNE IN SAN FRANCISCO

It wafted in the breeze a bit until police kicked it down, that banner that hung from the second-story roof of the former medical clinic at 888 Turk, white letters on black cloth: “Forgive us our trespasses.”

The SF Commune at 888 Turk lasted less than 24 hours—from the late afternoon of April 1 to mid-afternoon, April 2—but it may have pushed the Bay Area’s Occupy movement forward harder than many of the movement’s other actions of late. And despite the quick raid, the 75 arrests, the taking of those banners, many occupiers saw the building occupation as a success.

It was, in Occupy terms, an escalation so profound and unexpected that many dismissed it as an April Fool’s joke, perhaps at the expense of activist neighbors to the east. On the other side of the bay, on January 28, Occupy Oakland had attempted to take their own building for an Oakland Commune, but were met with an unprecedented amount of force from the Oakland Police and several supporting agencies. More than 400 people were ultimately arrested.

But the SF Commune was not a joke. If only for one frenzied day, the Spring Awakening shocked the Bay Area. It was clear how much the building meant to the movement that has largely been overshadowed by its wild East Bay neighbors. At least 22 school chairs were used to reinforce a barricade holding police out of the lot behind 888 Turk. Nearby, scrawled on a door: “When the cities burn down, we’ll all be warm.”

The activist group Homes Not Jails, who were involved in the 888 Turk action in a primarily advisory role, has been occupying buildings in San Francisco for 20 years. They opened several hundred buildings from the mid to late ’90s, creating symbolic short-lived occupations in some spaces and holding off police for days on end in others.

A week shy of one year prior, Homes Not Jails occupied a San Francisco apartment building owned by Kaiser Permanente. A banner hung from the roof read “Hella Occupied”—more than six months before Occupy Wall Street was born and that phrase came to typify the Bay Area iteration of the movement.

While many occupiers were excited by 888 Turk, some seasoned activists were nonplussed. “This is an old tactic,” said Lydia Blumberg, who has worked with Homes Not Jails in the past and had brought her 4-year-old daughter to the building’s “Sacred Space” the evening prior. “We’ve been doing this for years.”

Homes Not Jails first took the 600-unit Cathedral Hill Hotel on October 10 with support from Occupy San Francisco. Occupiers took the building once again on January 20 following the “Occupy Wall Street West” day of action which shut down the downtown San Francisco financial district.

“We learned from Cathedral Hill,” said occupier Jesse Smith of 888 Turk. “Barricades, contingency plans.”

“It makes me optimistic that we have all these kids carrying the torch,” said Blumberg.

And they’ve carried it to the foot of the San Francisco Catholic Church, which owns 888 Turk. Some critics were skeptical of the choice of target, especially during a week of religious celebration. Occupiers countered with the message that the Catholic Church is the 1% as well. It owns many vacant Bay Area properties on which it does not pay property taxes.

The 9,950-square-foot, 2-story building at 888 Turk which became Occupy SF’s commune used to house Westside Community Crisis and Outpatient mental health services. Occupiers say the building had been vacant for five years, but a spokesperson for the Archdiocese said it had only been vacant for 18 months, and was previously housing Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory High classes. 888 Turk has received numerous complaints for failure to register in the city’s vacant building database over the last two years. According to online real estate listings, it is currently listed for lease at $11,000 per month.
“The camps made a statement and were great to be visible but for the long-term mission of occupy, we need buildings,” said Jesse Smith. The clear strategic advantage doesn’t hurt, either. "It’s a hell of a lot harder to kick us out of a building than it is to kick us out of a park."

But it is, of course, not impossible.

Occupiers first took the building around 5:45 p.m. on Sunday April 1, following a march of several hundred from downtown. It was clear that activists had held the building for some time before opening it—a skeletal organizational structure were already in place, as were signage and literature. The police said they were "monitoring" the situation, but couldn't do anything until the Catholic Archdiocese of San Francisco filed a formal complaint of citizen's arrest, asking for the occupiers' removal. The most tense moment that first night came when the police briefly held up the occupiers' pizza delivery.

By the next morning, things had changed. The San Francisco police had declared the area a "crime scene" and were for the most part limiting access to the building for both people and supplies. One particularly tough battle involved the delivery of morning coffee; occupiers were ultimately successful.

San Francisco occupier Alex Kerfoot told me "it was like siege warfare." And that was before police moved in.

Shortly before 2 p.m., San Francisco police and county sheriffs began the raid on 888 Turk after noting that because people were bringing in supplies, "those trespassing inside intended to remain inside and were not going to leave." At some point early Monday, police say, an Archdiocese representative also requested the SFPD remove the protesters, and signed a citizen's arrest for trespassing giving the agency the authority to do so. According to Kerfoot, occupiers inside the building were on the phone, planning to meet with the Archdiocese at 3pm about the future of the building.

Police moved in suddenly and without warning. Journalist Steve Rhodes, having heard police were on their way, attempted to leave, but was unable to get out.

"Some people were trying to close the door and some people were trying to open the door to get out. And then the riot police arrived," he told me. "I was right at the entrance and I saw these riot police coming out—and my first thought was, take some photos." Rhodes didn't have a chance, though, because "there were non-lethal [shotguns] directed at my face when I was ordered to put my hands on my head." He was cited with misdemeanor trespass and released around 7 p.m. on Monday.

"They will often warn people so they don’t have to arrest as many," Rhodes said of the SFPD's approach to building occupations in the city. "But in this case it seemed they wanted to contain and intimidate."

Occupiers were arrested room by room. According to police, "trespassers retreated into rooms, many of which were barricaded from the inside, while others closed doors to an interior stairwell and retreated to the second floor." One person jumped off the roof and was arrested.

Police feared a fight that never came. Protesters defended the commune vigorously with barricades, but nothing was thrown at police before, during, or after the raid of 888 Turk Street, but the SFPD forwarded photos of piles of bricks to the press following the raid. "There was concern that these items were going to be used as weapons against police officers," SFPD said in a statement. The building was also marked by graffiti inside and out, ranging from hearts and messages of peace, including "Gun Free Zone" on the front facade, to "Kill Cops" and endless bacon jokes in upstairs corridors.

In all, 75 people were arrested and cited for misdemeanor trespassing, and three dogs were detained by city animal control. The Archdiocese declined to meet with a delegation of occupiers who marched to the cathedral uphill from 888 Turk late Monday afternoon following the raid.

The raid, though relatively peaceful, was not without shows of brutality. One protester, Nick Shaw, was put into a control hold by officers several times during the course of his arrest for alleged non-cooperation when asking for medical assistance to treat his injured hand. During arrest Shaw cried out, "I'm not resisting, I'm not resisting" as several police officers restrained him. At one point, Shaw lost consciousness on the bus headed for the jail and arrestees attempted to gain the attention of media and onlookers to obtain care. SFPD would not allow on-scene EMTs to care for Shaw; instead they cited and released him several hours earlier than other protesters.

Many of the arrestees were not in a sense residents of Occupy San Francisco; many were from Oakland, UC Berkeley, and other Bay Area protest sites. This sort of regional cross-pollination and convergence has been happening for...
months across the Northern California outposts of the movement. This fluidity across the region stands to unite the area headed into the May 1 General Strike, the painfully ironic court date many of the 888 Turk arrestees received for their trespass.

“Because it’s Occupy and not Homes Not Jails, they think that [these arrests] would keep people from joining another occupation,” said Rhodes of the 888 Turk crackdown. “Whereas all it may do is inspire more people to get involved.”

“It makes me optimistic that this going to be a more widespread move-ment,” said Blumberg. "It makes me optimistic because this used to be a totally radical fringe thing, and now you’ve got the whole Occupy movement surrounding it and taking it up as their cause.”

In the Occupy Wall Street People’s Kitchen

“The kitchen’s the keeper of the flame,” Bill Borenstein tells me as he pushes a mop across the floor of the Liberty Café, the soup kitchen in East New York’s Industrial Park where the Occupy Wall Street People’s Kitchen prepares dinner, Monday through Friday, for as many as three hundred people.

“As long as there’s food at Occupy, people show up,” Borenstein is a wiry, energetic man in his fifties who has an office job that he doesn’t say much about. He has been drafting a grant application to the Movement Resource Group, a 501c3 formed by the founders of Ben and Jerry’s, Nirvana’s former manager, and other 1%ers who want to keep Occupy going. In the application, Borenstein stresses how the Kitchen has been central to the movement in many ways. Back in the days of Zuccotti Park, the mainstream media loved calling attention to how free meals drew unemployed and homeless people from all over (in an article called “Want to Get Fat on Wall Street? Try protesting,” the New York Times quoted one Occupier boasting that he had gained five pounds after twelve days of tenting up in the park). To some extent, Occupy’s daily presence has made it something of a bread line, feeding whoever is hungry and nearby—but Kitchen’s main purpose is to keep activists fed so they can keep on working.

“So why food? What does this have to do with Occupy?” Borenstein writes in the application. “On the simplest, most practical level, we help people in our community to work—a person can participate in a Direct Action instead if looking for temp work to pay for tomorrow’s dinner, a meeting can progress instead of breaking up for lunch, an arrestee can remain calm in jail knowing that a hot meal is waiting upon his release.”

It’s a Wednesday, and although there are no grand-scale Occupy events planned in Union Square today—only a forum hosted by the Occupy Student Debt Campaign—the People’s Kitchen still expects to feed around two hundred people. Around noon, Ethan Murphy arrives at the East New York location to determine the menu for dinner. He looks around at the supplies: spices, oil, and flour, which were purchased before Zuccotti Park was raided in November, and random assortments of produce, donated by the Park Slope Co-op. “The cupboard is pretty bare,” he says.

At one time, the People’s Kitchen was getting thousands of dollars each month from the half-million dollars in donations that Occupy Wall Street had garnered when it was fresh in the public’s eye. But now, that money is gone—no one wanted to talk about where it had gone to, or why it was inaccessible—and the Kitchen is scraping by.

But Occupiers are nothing if not resourceful, and Murphy—who worked as a cook, server, and restaurant manager for years, at upscale places like Armani Ristorante and Accademia di Vino, before switching to

“People who otherwise wouldn’t have participated in May Day are able to look at this sort of stuff, see what it is we’re able to do and that we’re not trying to hurt anybody,” said Smith of the SF Commune action. “SFPD’s biggest mistake was letting us do this,” said Jesse Smith. “It just proves to us and every other Occupy in the country that this can be done.”

Less than a week after this raid, on Easter Sunday, April 8, the SF Commune was “resurrected” at another Catholic Church property, this time as a clandestine occupation. San Francisco police encouraged property owners in the city to board up their vacancies a few days later, seemingly without knowledge of the Commune’s return. The Commune released a statement in response: “Now when the Police destroy even more doors and barricades, they can try to convince people that it is the occupiers causing ‘property damage.’ No problem, we got this.”
Two Takes on Co-Option

Jonathan Matthew Smucker

A Practical Guide to Co-Option

Almost immediately after a small band of activists first occupied Zuccotti Park in September of last year, many in the movement started expressing concern about potential co-option by more established and moderate forces. These concerns have become more central in 2012, an election year. Wariness is certainly warranted. But angst about an over-generalized sense of co-option may be an even bigger problem. We cannot build a large-scale social movement capable of achieving big changes without the involvement of long-standing broad-based institutions. OWS should actively and strategically forge relationships with many of these institutions, while preserving the role of OWS as an “outsider” force.

Good problem to have

In the wake of the initial successes of Occupy Wall Street, establishment Democrats—including the White House—started clamoring to figure out how to ride the anti-Wall Street populist wave. Some Democratic Party strategists asked what electoral use they might get out of the new movement. Judd Legum of the Center for American Progress (CAP) told the New York Times in early October that “Democrats are already looking for ways to mobilize protesters in get-out-the-vote drives for 2012.”

The hypocrisy of a party that is deeply in the pocket of Wall Street trying to ride an anti-Wall Street surge was widely ridiculed. Salon’s Glenn Greenwald scoffed at efforts “to exploit these protests into some re-branded Obama 2012 crusade and to convince the protesters to engage in civil disobedience and get arrested all to make themselves the 2012 street version of OFA [Organizing For America].” Greenwald was right, and was echoing a widespread sentiment inside Zuccotti Park and the other occupations around the country.

Very few of the committed folks sacrificing time, safety, and comfort to make the occupations and street protests happen are going to switch uncritically into re-elect Obama mode.

And yet, something important is missing in many movement conversations about the threat of Democratic Party co-option: namely that this is a good problem to have. This is what political leverage looks like. Grassroots social justice movements haven’t had much leverage for a very long time, and over the past months we’ve finally gotten a taste of it. Having leverage allows us to frame the national discussion and to pull things in a social justice direction. In a very short time span, Occupy Wall Street dramatically shifted the dominant national conversation from a conservative deficit framework to a critique of economic inequality and the political disenfranchisement of most Americans.

How often is a genuinely grassroots social justice movement in a position where it’s framing the national narrative, and where the major political parties are reacting to us? Having this kind of leverage is perhaps the most important thing in politics. Without leverage, all you have is a political analysis. Trying to engage in political struggle with an analysis but no leverage is like coming to a gunfight armed only with the truth. Good luck with that!

So, in political struggle, when powerful forces want to co-opt your momentum, that means you have leverage, and that’s a good problem for a grassroots movement to have. Serious movement strategy conversations about the threat of co-option should start with this happy realization. Yes, wariness of establishment and “moderate” forces is certainly warranted. But generalized fears of co-option can have a paralyzing effect on our ability to activate a broad spectrum of allies—especially if we uncritically lump together and dismiss every national organization, labor union, community organization, etc., that engages in any electoral work or even legislative work.

Even if you concede that establishment forces want to co-opt a more radical agenda—well, so what? What does that even mean? It means that different groups and institutions have different agendas, and they’re always looking for ways to further those agendas.

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Pastor Leo is seen among the kitchen team as very generous.

“What Pastor Leo is doing is really incredible,” I’m told by Maura Spery, an Occupier who is gray-haired but as energetic as a twenty-year-old, and who earns a living doing high-end paint jobs for “1%ers.” A few times a week, Spery brings over donations from the Park Slope Co-op, and she also carves the food and the kitchen volunteers in her van to wherever they need to go. Until the eviction on November 15, the destination was Zuccotti Park, but after that it would change every day: sometimes the public atrium at 60 Wall Street, other times the Spokes Council meetings, and now, since March 17th, Union Square.

“We have a moral and financial obligation to Pastor Leo,” Spery tells me as we and several occupiers and the food are driving through Brooklyn, toward the Manhattan Bridge, in Spery’s van. Pastor Leo’s work in low-income, working-class Brooklyn strikes her as more amazing than anything Occupy is doing. He runs transitional homes for formerly homeless families, providing them with social workers, food, and a clean place to live for a short time while they look for work and a home. “We have people in this country who are both obese and have malnutrition. They live in a food desert. There’s no food!” Spery screams as we coast along Eastern Parkway, passing by retail outlets, drug
including labor unions, national advocacy organizations, community organizations, and faith communities. Radicals never have and never will have sufficient numbers to go it alone. We have to muster the courage and smarts to be able to forge and maintain alliances that we can influence but cannot fully control. That’s the nature of a broad populist alignment.

If we are to continue building on the momentum that Occupy Wall Street kicked off, we can’t treat institutions and individuals as if they were one-dimensional characters with simple and permanently fixed motives. Larger membership organizations can be complicated, and their programs and politics are often a mixed bag. The temptation for radicals is to focus on everything they’ve ever done wrong (i.e. all the things that radicals don’t like). But many of these institutions and movements began with premises that are not so far from our own. We have to figure out how to invite them and the people inside them to shift and to change. This includes institutions we don’t align with on every issue and who have disappointed us in the past. Achieving significant changes requires building broad alliances. While of course there are lines to draw (e.g. we should never align with organized racists), generally we can’t afford to be puritanical when it comes to building a broad movement.

One Co-option at a Time

Social movement theorists have a term for the sort of co-option that Occupy Wall Street should prize: infrastructure co-option. Nascent movements become mass movements not by building their own infrastructure entirely from scratch or recruiting new volunteers one at a time, but by “co-opting” existing institutions and social infrastructure into the service of the movement and its goals. The Civil Rights movement went big when existing institutions—especially black churches and schools—came to identify strongly as part of the movement. Organizers provided opportunities for members of those pre-existing institutions to make this new identification actionable and visible. This was enabled to such an extent that, eventually, to be a member of certain institutions implied active involvement in the Civil Rights movement. When this happens with enough institutions, the movement gets a huge boost in capacity. And capacity means power.

Over the past few months many organizations and constituencies have been watching Occupy Wall Street, trying to figure out whether and how to relate to the movement. Some of these are already engaging in important ways, explicitly as part of—or in support of—Occupy Wall Street. And many more have long been engaged in work that clearly aligns with the movement’s core values—and probably even deserve some credit for helping to lay the movement’s core values. Empirical support for these positions is unimpeachable.

But there are still significant barriers standing in the way of broader constituencies conceptualizing themselves as part of a 99% movement and getting actively involved. The first and most obvious barrier is that many groups haven’t really been asked to get involved. During the first couple months of OWS, if a group wanted to get involved, it was typically a matter of them taking the initiative to approach us and ask what kind of support they might provide. Usually the answer was some variety of “Come down to Zuccotti Park” or “Stand up against Bloomberg for our right to occupy the park.” Often the groups that wanted to support OWS simply showed up. While this kind of involvement made perfect sense when we held the park, it’s clear that we now have to come up with other ways for more people and groups to take action as part of the 99% movement.

This is a critical transition for Occupy Wall Street and the 99% movement. Remember that Occupy Wall Street kicked off with a well timed call-to-action, a ripe target, some planning, and a lot of crazy luck. As a result, OWS has understandably had more of a culture of mobilizing than of organizing. It’s been a little like a group of folks who don’t know anything about farming who arrive at a farm at harvest time. There’s delicious food everywhere, and all they have to do is pick, pluck, and gather it. And eat it! “Wow,” one of them exclaims, “farming is awesome! Why would we waste our time cultivating the soil? This food is delicious! I want to eat it all the time!” This is working very well. We should just keep doing this—all the time!”

Occupy Wall Street has been something of a harvest moment. It pulled thousands of people out of the woodwork who’d been waiting for something just like this to come along, and who were in a place where we could carve out time from our lives to engage it. But movements need hundreds of thousands of if not millions of active participants to become mass movements. It’s difficult if not impossible to activate those kinds of numbers by just taking public action with the hope that other like-minded individuals will decide to join you. We need more on-ramps and more ways to be involved—for folks who might not yet feel comfortable camping out at a public park.

More than any other factor, people get involved in social change because people know and respect provide an opportunity for them to get involved. In their essay “Collective Identity and Activism: Networks, Choices,” and the Life of a Social Movement, Debra Friedman and Doug McAdam cite proximity to movement activity as the single biggest factor for why people become active in grassroots change efforts:

Structural proximity to a movement, rather than any individual disposition, produces activism. Although individuals differ in their dispositions, the opportunities afforded by structural proximity relative to a movement determine whether they are in a position to act on these dispositions. Empirical support for these positions is unimpeachable.

In other words, while many people hold beliefs compatible with Occupy Wall Street, a very small percentage are currently taking action on those beliefs—and a primary factor for why some people have become active is simply that they encountered opportunities provided by people close to them who are already active. This is why our growth has reached something of a plateau. And this is why it is now critical that we meet with folks stores, and Kentucky Fried Chickens.

On the radio, an announcer is talking about a potential upcoming debate in Texas with the Republican candidates for president, and saying excitedly that “debate is good for democracy.” There is a pause, and then every single person in the car bursts into laughter. No one even says anything, just laughs. Sperry switches the radio off.

+++ In Union Square, we plop down the tubs of food on a table facing 14th Street, just across from Whole Foods. Technically, we’re within the bounds of the law because we’re on the sidewalk, not quite in the park itself. But the right to serve dinner was a hard-won battle.

A few weeks earlier, the Parks Department had tried to shut down dinner service, saying that it was against health codes to dish out food in a public park. The Occupiers wouldn’t stand for it. They huddled out their cell phone cameras and aimed them at the officials, as if expecting violence—this was just a few days after many Occupiers were beaten by police officers while celebrating the movement’s six-month anniversary, in Zuccotti Park—and they shouted, screamed, and mic-checked about the absurdity of the Parks Department’s complaints. Circles of people formed around an officer standing in front of the table where dinner was served as the officer tried to explain that it wasn’t allowed. The food servers responded by asking to see proof of a law they were breaking, and meanwhile, plates of sautéed greens and whole-grain rice were clandestinely put together and passed out. (The revolution will be fed.) The Park Department backed down, and dinner has been served nightly in Union Square ever since—though lately, Kitchen is making the rounds to Wall Street, where Occupiers have begun sleeping on sidewalks near the Stock Exchange.

Now, I stand proudly behind the slaw that I prepared, and in a blink, a hundred people are in line. I smile at them as I dole out their meal. An Occupier I know from the Zuccotti Park days appears next to me and mans the potatoes. Nobody seems too upset about the pork bits.

“The Kitchen has been, to our surprise, an excellent vehicle for outreach,” Borenstein has written in his grant application. “We’ve found that a plate of food breaks down barriers and attracts those who are Occupy ‘shy’. We interact with hundreds of ‘customers’ each day and we find that many of the people we serve are the curious, the hesitant travelers, even the suspicious. At the Kitchen, we have an opportunity, in a non-confrontational environment, to answer questions, to listen and discuss the Occupy movement with those new to us.”

In today’s dinner line, there are some activists whose faces are familiar to me from General Assemblies or working group meetings that I’ve attended. Other diners appear to be vagrants who have heard about the new bread line in town. There are people who resemble graduate students, and others who walk by and peer at the food inquisitively, ask a few questions, and then grab a plate mostly out of curiosity. There is no General Assembly tonight; those meetings
who are movers and shakers in other social networks and institutions. That’s how the 99% movement can grow at the rate we all know it needs to; by activating whole swaths of society at a time.

But we have to approach those movers and shakers in the right way. Our “asks” of organizations shouldn’t be overly prescriptive. We have to start by establishing relationships. The term infrastructure co-option suggests a kind of functionalist attitude; as if a movement uses existing institutions in order to accomplish movement goals. One could look at the Civil Rights movement, point to core leaders, and argue that they exploited existing institutions to advance their agenda. But such an assessment would be wrong-headed. Civil rights leaders cultivated relationships with other organizations based on shared self-interest. This was a process of courting trust, cultivating deep collaboration and accountability, and making good judgments about the kinds of actions and messages that would resonate with different constituencies. Leaders had to act boldly, but also humbly.

Movement Season & Election Season

All of the above gets so much more complicated in an election year. Occupy Wall Street is an outsider force. It should remain an outsider force this year. If it were to endorse candidates or a particular political party, it would immediately lose all of its value and leverage. Our job is to push from the outside.

But that’s not at all to say that we shouldn’t have a strategy for engaging with the energy and media attention of the election season. We should. And how we do it will seriously affect our ability to continue to grow this movement, to be seen as relevant, to cultivate alliances, and to leverage power to effect real change.

As an outsider force, one of our biggest tasks is to set the terms of debate. For decades now, the terms of debate have shifted further and further to the right, as conservatives united under a shared anti-government (i.e. anti-social spending) narrative, and have been put on hold temporarily while Occupy works through the Spokes Council. The main agenda item now is preparing for May 1st, a day of planned strikes across the nation.

As we wrap up dinner, a group of roughly thirty people nearby are crowded around a professor from NYU, Nicholas Mirzoeff, who is delivering a lecture that compares debt to forms of slavery. But most of the people who just ate dinner have resumed hanging out on the steps of the park, where they are smoking hand-rolled cigarettes and playing guitar.

The Kitchen team heads uptown to the church where many Occupiers are residing, where they are having a planning session for a free concert they hope to hold in Prospect Park this summer as a fundraiser for Occupy. Tomorrow they will be back in East New York, working through their dwindling supplies, patching together a meal that will feed hundreds of people who may not even know what Occupy Wall Street is, but recognize good food when they see it.

Ethan Murphy tells me that the most memorable meal he’s prepared for Occupy was a multi-cheese lasagna—but it wasn’t so much the dish itself that stays on his mind. “It was the day the barricades came down in Zuccotti Park.”

On one level, the People’s Kitchen is, as Borenstein says in their grant application, simply filling bellies, literally fueling the revolution. But they also represent the Occupy movement’s ability to continue on—despite fluctuations in media interest or the constant threat of police violence, in the face of squandering or hidden monies, and regardless of whether May 1st will be proclaimed a success or not. They Occupy because it’s what they do, and, to some extent, because it’s personally rewarding to stay involved and keep the thing going. Nobody has to show up to East New York to spend four hours preparing food.

Nobody has to hold down the space in Union Square when it’s cold and drizzling. Nobody has to attend meetings to plan events that may or may not come together. But they keep on doing it—they keep on supporting each other, patiently listening to each other, bailing each other out of jail, and, every day at 6pm, feeding each other.
The wife of an activist who died under strange circumstances, though more likely than not it was an accident, says to me that she literally feels herself shaken from everything that’s going on, the arrests and the interrogations of activists . . . I’m sure you know the story of N, she says. A labor activist, they planted drugs on him, he got five years. International campaigns have proved useless. Yes, I said, I know, of course. So what can we do, she says, what sort of action can we plan, so that everyone finds out? What should we do? And I say, we have two choices. Either we patiently build the labor unions . . . or we have to do something really ugly, because no radical art actions are going to help here, are going to get through. And she says, yes, and then what? We commit a terrorist act? That’s the same thing right now, as sticking your head out of the trench, and getting it blown off . . . And as for labor unions, she says, I know the labor activists, they’re wonderful people, but it’s all so slow . . . How long will it take, although, it’s true, it’s the only way. In the end it’s the labor unions that are the true workshop of communism. Yes, I say, right now that’s the situation, no matter what anyone says, and who knows what the future may bring, but for the moment the progressive labor activists have a higher political consciousness than the intellectuals, than the professors, it’s just too bad there are so few of them.

of delivering. And for all the horrendous limits of the two-party system, still a slate of candidates who get elected pledging to take on the big banks gives us a lot more to work with—as an outsider social movement—than a slate of candidates elected on a pledge to cut social spending. And more importantly, it keeps the momentum on our side. Another important question has to do with how we engage allies who do endorse candidates. Many labor unions, for example, are likely at some point to endorse President Obama’s reelection bid. Some already have. And some will surely endorse specific state and local candidates. We’re an outsider force. We should never endorse candidates. But is it possible to ally around specific actions with organizations that also endorse candidates? It has to be. We join up with others where we can, and we depart where we depart. If we call for an end to corporate personhood, for example, we should welcome as many co-endorsers as possible, including organizations that endorse politicians—and even politicians themselves. Welcoming politicians’ endorsements of our goals doesn’t mean endorsing those politicians. This is an important detail, and it requires a precise threading of the needle. As an outside force, we have to take all politicians to task, regardless of party. But the details of how we do this matter. We need to pressure politicians and candidates, and the best way to do this is to ask them hard questions and provide pressure that pulls them in our direction (or put them on the defensive). If we ask good questions that resonate with the people who hear them, then we’re doing our job well. If, on the other hand, we make general statements like, “It doesn’t matter who you vote for; they’re all the same,” then we’re being needlessly belligerent to our allies and potential allies (without even putting politicians on the defensive). An organization focused primarily on reproductive rights, for example, will understandably be very concerned about whether Barack Obama or Mitt Romney occupies the White House. We can take candidates from both parties to task on an array of other issues without spurning their reasons for deciding to endorse a candidate.
National Guard came in to break up the tent city the miners had put up in Ludlow, Colo-
cado; they set up a machine gun on a height over the camp and then burned the camp
down; many strikers were killed. The event has since been called the Ludlow Massacre.
The Rockford Foundation decided to provide relief to individual workers but not to the
striking unions. They advertised this heavily while at the same time funding research to
prove the massacre never took place.
The Funders Network on Transforming the Global Economy (FNTG) is a contempo-
rary version of the same model. While it may use appealing slogans and images, FNTG is
a project of Community Partners Inc. On its board sit corporate lawyers and CPAs along
with Edgie Corin (Vice Chair of Ameriprise Financial Inc., the largest financial planning
firm in the United States with over $600 billion in assets.
FNTG’s Mark Randazzo and his colleagues on the panel, like many others, are trapped.
They may have worthwhile pursuits, such as workers’ struggles, building sustainable infra-
structure, or alleviating poverty. But they will never address the cause. They will only treat
the symptoms.Origins of the Movement Resource Group
I first met Shen Tong in mid October at Charlotte’s Place, a popular meeting spot by
Liberty Plaza. He came to inquire about work I was doing with the Spokes Council model
and wanted to collaborate. He introduced himself as the preeminent student organizer
behind Tianannmen Square, which was intriguing. His goal, he said, was to streamline all
the working groups and make OWS as efficient as possible. There were charts for each
agenda item and time limits to every phrase. Throughout the following weeks I saw Shen
harrowing over meetings at 60 Wall trying to recruit legions of followers. He was successful with a few and formed the Organiza-
tion Working Group. “Scrum,” a term borrowed from management theory, was their motto. Shen would often proclaim, “No meeting should exceed 15 minutes,” and he kept people on schedule. The model had been used in the tech industry for years as a way to raise productivity. It was corporate, rigid, and strange to most occupants, who eyed Shen warily.
Ravi Ahmad, a type A Oxford grad, was recruited by Shen early on, but later became
disenchanted. She told me she felt Shen did not understand the nature of Occupy. She
would tell him, “We’re not an organization. We don’t have a platform. We’re an experience”—but Shen pushed ahead. The Organization Working Group was transforming into a fundraising machine called the Occupy Money Group (OMG), which later became the Movement Resource Group (MRG). In November and December, OWS’s working groups had to be approved by the General Assembly and could not receive outside funding. Thus, in an effort to avoid regulation, MRG called itself an “affinity” group and bastardized the term in the process. Affinity groups were first adopted during the Spanish Civil War. Of social gatherings grew smaller groups of 5-10 people who shared principles, interests, or skills in common.
They were organized in an autonomous, non-hierarchical, and anti-oppressive way often operating by consensus. Many movements have used affinity groups as a primary unit of organization including the anti-nuclear movement and alter-globalization movement. The Occupy movement has many affinity groups for action, support, and self-care.
MRG, while it may call itself one, is not an affinity group. It is a vanguardist, hierarchi-
cal, and oppressive in its operation. This is not in keeping with the history or practice of any
affinity group. I’m not sure how Shen Tong met Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, the founders of ice cream giant Ben and Jerry’s. Ben Cohen’s son was an occupier, and both Ben and Jerry had been to Liberty Plaza to do “scoups” (i.e. give out ice cream in branded Ben and Jerry’s cups), but the origins of the meeting with Shen remain unclear. Somewhat, Ben and Jerry joined the Occupy Money Group and helped form MRG.
I followed MRG from a distance throughout the winter. With the exception of one visit
to Spokes Council over the holiday season, there was no attempt to work thru democratic
structures. It seemed to be a closed and top-down group, which is contrary to the spirit of
Occupy. One day in early February I received a call from Ben and Jerry’s assistant who said, “I hear there are some concerns regarding MRG.” I said, “There are questions.”
A week later, I had a conference call with Ben and Jerry. They wanted to know more
about how things worked in Occupy. I explained that it was a horizontal movement, that
we had our own ways of making decisions, and that a foundation model wouldn’t work.
I invited them to the community dialogues I was hosting, so that we could have an open
discussion around resources. They did not come. Instead, they decided to hold a panel
discussion of their own.
On Sunday, February 26th the Movement Resource Group convened an “Informa-
tional Meeting for the OWS Community” at West Park Presbyterian Church on Manhat-
tan’s Upper West Side. The church had been used to house occupiers after the raid at
Liberty Plaza. Curious, I decided to attend with some friends and fellow occupiers.
I entered the cathedral. A table had been set up in front of the pulpit, sitting at it were
Rachel Fink (Chair of Rhino Records), Danny Goldberg (music mogul and producer), Dai
Lamagna (founder of Tweeserman, the cool tweeter company), Judy Wicks (a leading sus-
tainable food activist and founder of the White Dog Cafe in Philadelphia), and of course Ben
and Jerry themselves. They were comfortably addressing the crowd of a hundred or so
occupiers and supporters. I took a seat in the pews and listened as, one by one, they regaled us with tales of past
movements and activist cred. They didn’t think of themselves as being wealthy; though
they were, in fact, wealthy, they thought of themselves as regular people. Then came the
presentation. A white screen rolled down over the stained glass windows. A projection shot across
the room, illuminating the alter. There was a new god at West Park, the god of capital.
Ben Cohen, accustomed more to boardrooms than parks, introduced a Power-
Point presentation. He explained with great excitement that MRG intended to fund the
“national” Occupy movement to the greatest extent possible. He gave outlines, projec-
tions, and grant deadlines. MRG had incorporated as a 501c3 and raised $300,000 but
were aiming for $1.3 million over the course of the next year. Cohen’s presentation was
clear, concise, and left little room for questions. The MRG Board of Directors, including
all those on the panel, would select five members from MRG and five “occupiers” (two from
NY and three from other occupiers) to sit on a committee, which would then evalu-
ate grant proposals as they came in.
The floor opened for questions. I was second on stack and, holding back tears and
trembling, I said, “I just can’t get rid of a sinking feeling in my stomach. This goes against
the very foundation of the movement I helped to build,” and I went on a bit before asking
Ben Cohen, “What do you hope to achieve?” The room was silent. In a weak and empty
voice he said, “We just want to build a movement.”
This meeting had been billed as a way to connect with MRG and offer salient advice to
their organization. What I found was an elite group of largely older, all-white, men wielding
their power and privilege to influence politics. They placated us by saying they would take their concerns to heart and meet again. There was no follow-up meeting. MRG moved
ahead as planned. The next day they were accepting grant applications.
The 99% Spring
When I first heard that Move-on wanted to train 100,000 people in direct action, I did a
double take. Move-on.org, the group that pioneered armchair activism, that mass-pro-
duced actions, and that drove millions to the polls for Obama, wanted to train people in
direct action. Something was wrong with this picture.
Indeed there was. Move-on.org joined with Rebuild the Dream, the Other 98% (a.k.a.
Andrew Boyd), 350.org, the Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU), the Communi-
cations Workers of America (CWA), and the AFL-CIO and dozens of other Democratic
Party supporters to initiate the project. They had incredible resources at their fingertips,
and they leveraged them in a visionary exercise of co-option:
Move-on.org thought they could do what they’ve always done: take corporate money,
funnel it through progressive causes, give it a spin, and call it activism. They handpicked
dozens of young trainers from around the country to shepherd the project, but it was
a rush job. Sam Corbin, a trainer in NY, told me that Move-on and the coalition had no
experience with direct action and wanted to appeal to their base of largely white middle
class liberals. She referred to them internally as “vanilla.” They made tokenizing references to Gandhi and MLK and gushed about non-violent direct action, but there was little prac-
tical application. No follow-up direct actions were planned.
The 19th century anarchist and feminist, Voltairine de Cleyre wrote, “Every person
who ever had a plan to do anything, and went and did it, or who laid his plan before oth-
ers, and won their co-operation to do it with him, without going to external authorities
to please do the thing for them, was a direct actionist.”
A direct action may be sharing food, sewing clothing, or building a tent. It may be a
strike, boycott, or other form of refusal. It may also be a form of disruption at the point
of production or destruction. Regardless, direct action is against the existing economic and
political institutions and for new social relations. It does not recognize the existing power
structures, and this is precisely what makes it effective.
The Occupy movement has grown from direct action. When we occupied Zuccotti Park
and renamed it Liberty Plaza we did not ask permission. We did not demand that we have
the park. We simply took the park and transformed it into the world we wanted to live in,
that is, a world based in mutual aid, trust, and self-management. This is exactly the kind
of world that Move-on.org and the rest of the 99% Spring are determined to extinguish.
Move-on.org, the former Director at Move-on’s progressive pit bull, and 99% Spring
supporter, wrote an article in the Nation stating, “It’s humant to mourn the death of the
early days of the cohesive and compelling communities in the town squares, which
grapped the world’s attention. Let’s honor the past, note what has changed and make way
for the new. Occupy is dead! Long live Occupy!”
The best way to kill something is to memorialize it. This is the objective of the 99%
Spring. By taking on the appearance of the movement (i.e. using common phrases and
frames) and integrating it into so-called practical actions Move-on has attempted to kill
the Occupy movement.
This is an election year. Everything is at stake. There will be many more attempts like
The 99% Spring to come.
All That Glitters
The 1% have no intention of funding a movement that actually poses a threat to their
power. They seek to manage social movements via foundations thru resource allocation,
top-down structures, and co-opting language. In the past this strategy has proven effective at
dividing, conquering, and integrating movements into respectable forms of activism,
and it’s starting to take hold.
Some of us in the movement have given into easy fixes. We have seen gold dangling
before us, and, in the face of economic hardship and instability, have taken it, mistaking it for
something real.
Let us remember what drew us to this work. The Occupy movement is not a shiny object to be sold to the highest bidder. It is an
election year. Everything is at stake. There will be many more attempts like
The 99% Spring to come.
When some people think about Wall Street, they conjure up images of traders shouting on the stock exchange, of bankers dining at five-star restaurants, of CEOs whispering in the ears of captured Congress members. When I think about Wall Street, I think about its stunted rainbow of pale pastel shirts. I think about the vaulting, highly secured, and very cold lobbies. And I think about the art passed daily by the harried workers, virtually unseen. Before I occupied Wall Street, Wall Street occupied me. What started as a summer internship led to a seven-year career. During my time on Wall Street, I changed from a curious college student full of hope for my future, into a cynical, bitter, depressed, and exhausted “knowledge worker” who felt that everyone was out to screw me over.

The culture of Wall Street is pervasive and contagious. While there are Wall Street employees who are able to ignore it, or block it out, I was not one of them. I drank the Kool Aid. I’m out of it now. But I’d like to tell you what it was like.

+++ When you are wealthy and successful, you have a choice. You can believe your success stems from luck and privilege, or you can believe it stems from hard work. Very few people like to view their success as a matter of luck. And so, perhaps understandably, most people on Wall Street believe they have earned their jobs, and the money that follows. While there are many on Wall Street who come from wealthy backgrounds, there are also many people from very humble backgrounds. In my experience, it is often those who do not come from privilege who are the system’s fiercest defenders.

When I was a summer intern, we met with various executives who’d tell us about their careers and pitch us on the firm. The aim was to sell the firm to everyone, even though only a few of us would ultimately be offered full-time positions. There was an element of redundancy to it, since we were clearly already interested in the firm, or we wouldn’t be there at all. The effect of these talks, then, was to make a competitive situation even more competitive. Welcome to Wall Street. One executive described the firm as a “Golden Springboard.” If we began our careers there, his reasoning went, there wasn’t anywhere we couldn’t go. The executive was right. Background becomes irrelevant once you have “made it” to Wall Street. Once you’ve gotten in the door, you’re one of “us.”

+++ Once hired, the cultural indoctrination begins in earnest, especially for those recent grads who begin their careers in “analyst training programs.” These
Foreclosure Defense in the Bronx

Occupy Onwards conference
December 18, 2011
New School for Social Research, New York City

Naison: In the 1930s, there was an incredibly powerful anti-eviction movement, one branch of which was focused on the cities, another of which was focused on rural areas. There was an organization in the Midwest called the Farm Holiday Association, which organized to prevent farms from being foreclosed by banks, and that basically involved people with rifles standing there and refusing to allow the house to be taken. There was also an organization in Alabama called the Alabama Sharecroppers Union, which resisted seizures of land, animals, and tools from African-American sharecroppers and tenant farmers who had mortgaged their properties. And there is a great book about that called All God’s Dangers, which is something that people might want to read. But I want to mainly talk about the urban anti-eviction movement, which was on a scale that is difficult to imagine.

The Communist Party organized eviction resistance in the cities. Let me describe what eviction resistance involved. When the marshals came to put the furniture in the street, Communists in neighborhoods would organize people to put the furniture back and, when the marshals came back, stand in front of the building and refuse to let the marshals take the furniture out again. The marshals could not normally stand the force, at which point the police had to come in, and would have to make a decision as to whether they wanted to enforce the eviction.

If you have 300 people against three or four police officers—well, what happened in Chicago was that one group of police officers shot and killed three black Communists involved in this movement. And then fifty thousand people marched through the city in a memorial parade—and after that it became incredibly difficult to evict anybody in Chicago.

But the biggest anti-eviction movement was right here in New York City, especially in the Bronx.

Here we have to talk a little bit about the Communist Party, which was the organization that coordinated these protests. This eviction resistance was not the first coordinated action that the Communist Party took in the face of the Depression. The first strategy was hunger marches. On March 6, 1930, there were marches in fifty cities around the country of Communists demanding worker wage raises; marches on city halls that in some cases involved thirty or forty thousand people; marches on charities like the Salvation Army. In the fall of 1930, the Communist Party, which had

programs are exclusively for college and graduate students, are often several months long, and are custom-tailored to the department you’ll ultimately join. The Sales & Trading analyst program is more competitive than, say, the Technology training program. And while most of the training is job-specific, there is also an air of finishing school. A trader friend of mine was instructed not only in the mathematics of the financial markets, but also in wine tasting and golf. You are trained, but also you are groomed.

The grooming is not all fun and games and country clubs. Most of the message revolves around how hard everyone works, and how hard you are expected to work in turn. Wall Street views its own work ethic as legendary. Sixty-hour weeks are standard. An ex-boss of mine used to brag that for one six-year stretch he never took a sick day or a vacation. The streak ended when he contracted strep throat, refused to go to the doctor, and eventually had to be hospitalized (at least so he claimed).

While not everyone was as manic as my boss (Wall Street has more than its fair share of laziness and incompetence), even those who feel less committed to the job still buy into a concept of “face time.” It’s not right to leave your desk before a certain time. An ex-colleague of mine used to ask anyone who’d pass by his cubicle before 7pm on their way out the door, “Oh, half day today?”

This dueling masochism/machismo brings with it a tremendous superiority complex. People on Wall Street truly believe they work harder than anyone else. When confronted with the stark reality of, for example, a single mom working two jobs, the response is usually some variant of, “Well, if they’d only worked as hard as I did in school . . .”

But the key to truly understanding superiority on Wall Street is by looking at how it’s measured: with cold, hard numbers. Numbers can be amplified by honest work, but they can also be amplified by betrayal, manipulation, and cheating. And when everything is a cold cost-benefit analysis, why wouldn’t you break regulations—provided you knew the profits you stood to make would dwarf the fines you would pay should you get caught?

+++ On Wall Street, the best-paid employees actively seek out their “market value” by interviewing and cultivating job offers at competing firms. Once they’ve secured an offer, they go back to their boss and try to land what’s called a “counter-offer.” If the new firm is offering to pay $300,000, the old firm may counter that offer with $400,000.

But even in this game of betrayal, a little bit of lying will optimize your results. You can solicit a counter by handing in a resignation letter. But to resign and then accept a counter is to admit you’re a mercenary. This will get you labeled a “high flight risk.” No, playing the game correctly to maximize money means pretending the game is not about money at all. A more strategic route is to explain, “Well, this offer just fell into my lap, I really don’t want to leave, is there anything you can do to help me out?”

Of course, manipulation isn’t only for tricking your bosses—it extends to the clients as well. On Wall Street, it is not frowned upon to “rip the faces off” one’s own clients. If the client is dumb enough to get hoodwinked, that means the client didn’t work hard enough. He didn’t do his “due diligence.” In other words, if I screw you, you only have yourself to blame. That is the “zero-sum game” of trading.

But perhaps the zenith of Wall Street fitness is the unpunished cheat. Around the holiday season, inter-dealer brokers will send gifts to the traders, trying to curry favor with bottles of wine or champagne. Inter-dealer brokers are brokers who allow Wall Street banks to anonymously trade with one another, since the last thing you want to do if you’re Morgan Stanley is let Goldman Sachs know your position, though you may still want to trade with them. But there is a catch to the gift-giving: according to FINRA, Wall Street’s self-regulatory agency, the brokers are only allowed to spend a maximum of $100 per trader. On slow winter days, the traders would Google the bottles of wine, trying to determine which vendors had cheated. Often they would find that yes, this vendor breached the limit. The response to the cheat was always the same: a smirk, and an approving nod. It’s not about who cheated. It’s about who cheated successfully.

This attitude extends to higher stakes games as well. Take the case, SEC v. CITIGROUP GLOBAL MARKETS, INC. According to the SEC, in 2007 Citigroup sold their clients a portfolio of assets (mortgage-backed securities, as it happens) that Citi was actively betting against. The SEC therefore charged Citigroup with securities fraud; it’s been reported that the fearsome regulatory agency won’t settle for anything less than a $250 million fine. Looks bad, right? Well, yes, unless you consider that, according to Forbes, Citigroup allegedly made $160 million on this one deal (investors lost $700 million). Citigroup looks like it’s going to lose $125 million! But how many similar deals have gone un-prosecuted? If the answer is one, Citigroup is back in the black; if the answer is more than one, then Citigroup is doing very well, thank you. This is why paying fines when you are caught breaking the rules is simply deemed “the cost of doing business” on Wall Street.

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December 18, 2011

Occupy Onwards conference

New School for Social Research, New York City
these Unemployed Councils, decided, “We need to something that concretely helps people.” Because the system was bankrupt, at that point, in terms of being able to provide aid. The political leadership was not willing to take those steps at that time. So the Communist Party began telling its units around the country: “Put the furniture back; organize the neighborhood to defend their neighbors. And the place that this took off the most was in the Bronx.

You began to have 100, or 400, and as many as four thousand people massing to prevent the police from taking the furniture.

Then you began to have rent strikes that the Communists organized to force landlords to lower rents so that people could afford to stay in their apartments.

By 1932, these rent strikes had spread throughout the Bronx so much that landlords were terrified they would no longer be able to run private housing in a profitable manner, because they couldn’t pay their mortgages.

Now, the reason you could get four thousand people was that the Communists didn’t come out of nowhere. The Communist Party in the Bronx was a real community organization: they ran social clubs; they ran sports leagues; they were organized in unions. So the Communist was not just somebody coming from nowhere; the Communist was your neighbor, helping you. And so when the Communist said, “We’re going to all be out in the street if we don’t do something,” people listened. It got to the point where there weren’t enough police to keep moving back the furniture.

And what you created was something of a system-wide crisis. How can you run private housing profitably if you have people not only refusing to pay rent, but then—remember, it cost money to bring in marshals. And if every time you bring in the marshals, the furniture gets put back, you’re kind of trapped.

So what you had in the Bronx was the landlords, the district attorney, and the police trying to create a coordinated strategy to stop this rent strike movement. They started to get ready to use injunctions. The injunctions were designed to give long jail sentences to the activists. This was all coming to a head in the fall of 1932.

The Communist Party and the other activists were now

Poker is extremely popular across Wall Street, and provides an instructive lesson. The book *Poker Winners Are Different* by industrial psychologist and poker adviser Alan Schoonmaker presents a scenario where a player notices his best friend’s “tell”—that is, the best friend has a habit of showing when he has a good or bad hand. The book then poses the following dilemma: should you (a) tell your friend, (b) win a bit of money from him, and then tell him, or (c) exploit your friend, never telling him. The correct answer: screw your friend. Schoonmaker, who used to do “management development” work at Merrill Lynch, writes that winners will “do whatever the rules and ethics allow to maximize their profits.” This behavior is heralded in poker and it’s heralded on Wall Street. Despite what may be emblazoned on plaques or in mission statements, the ethics of Wall Street are purely about winning at any cost.

+++ If they didn’t know it going in, Wall Street employees quickly learn that even their company is an enemy. The firm, employees are a cost to be minimized, or a producer to be exploited. You also learn that you must never show gratitude for your bonus. To appear satisfied with your compensation is to admit that they paid you more than they had to, so you must feign outrage no matter what. What happens to a culture that discourages gratitude?

But most people on Wall Street do not feel gratitude anyway. It does not matter that their compensation is enormous compared to the average American’s—that is not who a Wall Street worker is comparing herself to. She is looking at the compensation of the top sales person, the top trader, or, at the very top, the CEO.

What this environment did to me is that I began to see everyone as a threat. From that idiot two cubicles down from me, to the moron on the other end of the phone (the client), to—more than anything—the faceless, imagined people on government assistance who I assumed (incorrectly) were what was causing such large percentages to disappear from my paycheck.

Many of the adverse reactions to OWS have been along the lines of, “They’re just jealous.” Of course the Wall Street critics think OWS is about envy. Envy is part and parcel of their daily lives. When you are living in a culture of envy, you see envy everywhere you go. Why wouldn’t you think envy is at the core of our movement, too?

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The Communist Party and the other activists were now

The envy and hostility of Wall Street leads many to a common goal: to amass enough money so as to enact your revenge. This end goal is called fuck-you money.

At one point in my career, I was being recruited by a hedge fund. During the recruitment process, one of my interviewers frankly described the fund’s founder—his boss’s boss—as a “spoiled brat billionaire.” My interviewer related a story about a meeting between the hedge fund and an executive at a company the fund wanted to work with. At one point, the visiting executive made statements the fund founder didn’t like. The founder turned to the visitor and said, “So, you came here just to try and fuck me over?” The visitorquickly stormed out in a rage. But the founder wasn’t satisfied just yet. He followed the man out of the room, into the elevator, shouted the entire ride down, and then yelled at him in the lobby until he finally left the building. When the founder came back upstairs to greet his shaken employees, he said, invigorated and beaming, “Wasn’t that fun?”

This is Wall Street’s equivalent of the American Dream: to earn enough money so that you can behave in a way that makes the very existence of other people irrelevant.

+++ Despite the toxicity I’ve described, Wall Street is not a collection of %ers maniacally laughing at the 99% they have crushed under their boot. No, Wall Street is far too self-absorbed to be concerned with the outside world unless it is forced to. But Wall Street is also, on the whole, a very unhappy place. While there is always the whisper that maybe you too can one day earn fuck-you money, at the end of a long day, sometimes all you take with you are your misguided feelings of self-righteousness.

I am far from the only Wall Street employee ever to feel the churning up of the system, even as I worked to perpetuate it. Another ex-Wall Street employee described feeling like a “hyper-specialized pawn” who “worked all the time with little control” of her life, and “little personal satisfaction at the end of the day.” I, too, felt manipulated, and why shouldn’t I? That was the game, after all. I felt overworked, demotivated, and I was clearly doing nothing to help the world.

I was able to leave once I decided that my happiness was more valuable than money. This is no great revelation to anyone at Occupy, but to someone who lived and breathed the idea that money was everything for seven years, it was not so easy. The true key to getting out was taking off my blinders: meet with little control” of her life, and “little personal satisfaction at the end of the day.” I, too, felt manipulated, and why shouldn’t I? That was the game, after all. I felt overworked, demotivated, and I was clearly doing nothing to help the world.

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in a quandary, because they were facing massive arrests that would put people in jail for long periods of time.

But then the Roosevelt Administration came in and passed the Federal Emergency Relief Act, which gave over 2 billion dollars to the states for direct relief payments. At this point the Communists switched their strategy, from putting the furniture back to going to the relief bureaus to demand that families get relief payments.

Given that change in government policy, they were able to stop evictions by becoming a negotiating team for tenants on the verge of eviction. In any case, by 1933 evictions had substantially stopped in many cities.

When I think about what’s going on today, and what I just heard [from other panelists], the opportunity is there again, with the Occupy movements. People in the community don’t like to see their neighbors evicted. But you have to do it [this activism] as a member of the community.

Your willingness to put your bodies on the line makes a difference.

The other thing is, when you’re talking about communities of color—when [an earlier panelist was] talking about people saying, “Where were you?”—I thought of something else from when I was doing my research.

Some of you may know about the Scottsboro Case, when nine young black men were accused of rape in ridiculous circumstances and sentenced to death—the Communist Party was able to bring 5,000 mostly white people marching through Harlem saying “Free the Scottsboro Boys.” And what that said to people in this community was: We are no longer alone.

Now there is a chance for an alliance between newly radicalized people, and people who have been fighting these battles for a long time. I’m going to end by talking a little about who the Communists were, because it’s relevant to what we have today.

When the Depression began, about 70 percent of the members of the Communist Party were first-generation immigrants. Most of them were non-English-speaking radicals who had been radicalized in their country of origin; also people who had been members of the IWW, the International Workers of the World; and the Socialist Party.

But when the Depression started, a whole group of American-born people in these communities, who thought they were going to go to college, who thought they were going to become lawyers and doctors and teachers, were driven back into the working class. And those people became part of the Communist Party cadre.

Young, newly radicalized people from the high schools and colleges. And what you had was a movement that changed this country, that put grass roots activism of the unemployed on the agenda, and also began to build the unions.

I see us on the cusp of a similar situation.

I also want to say I can’t believe I don’t recognize a single face in this room, and it’s so exciting, because I’ve been in the movement for forty years.

[Laughter and cheering]

You guys are going to make history.

Sarah Ludwig: Mark has to go, and I want to just make sure that if someone has a burning question, you can ask now.

Audience: The Communist Party was highly centralized and hierarchical; OWS has a very different organization, it’s horizontal and leaderless. How do you make the comparison?

Naison: Both organizations are all over the country. And, just like the Communists, Occupy Wall Street, to survive, has to turn to the working class. How to do that, you’ll have to figure out how to do that. You’ve already figured out how to drive the system crazy, just like the Communists did. What comes next, you’ll figure out. I can’t tell you how to do it. You’re already doing it. Just keep doing it.

Anonymous

Wells Fargo Shareholder Meeting

By the time you read this, it will all be over. Do you know happened at Occupy Wall Street West on April 24?

Among my fellow participants in Occupy San Francisco, I have the dubious distinction of having worked for the very industry we are protesting against. I was employed for a financial firm in San Francisco. This company is entrusted with money from people’s retirement plans to invest in corporations. Part of my job was to monitor these corporations to ensure that your investment was protected from management chicanery and continued to be profitable. Publicly traded companies are legally obligated to hold annual meetings for the people who have purchased their stock. If you own ten shares of Wells Fargo stock, then you, as a partial owner of the company, have the right to cast ten votes on proposals such as those regarding executive compensation and members of the board of directors. In reality, of course, your vote is purely symbolic. The “institutional investors,” like the firm that employed me, have the power to cast hundreds of thousands of votes to your ten.

I attended the Wells Fargo shareholder meeting in San Francisco a few years ago. For cubicle-bound minions like me, this was a field trip to see how executives and board members conduct themselves under the public gaze. We arrived at the intersection of California Street and Sansome Street, one block away from the Wells Fargo meeting location and were surprised to see a colorful street fair with chanting, music and . . . bullhorns? Picket signs? Our not-so-affinity group squeezed past people holding banners that read “Stop Wells Fargo!” and “Give Us Back Our Homes!” and arrived, our suits a bit askew, at our destination, the Merchant’s Exchange Building. Once inside the marble entrance hall, we submitted our IDs and business cards for inspection and were escorted to a

The author is a member of the Occupy the SEC working group, and the Break up B of A campaign.
On the other side of the Atlantic, left intellectuals have been starting to discover what they have to learn from religion about revolution. Slavoj Zizek, Alain Badiou, and Giorgio Agamben have all written about the apostle Paul in recent years: he stood at the intersection of Judaism and Christianity and was the architect of an underground movement that eventually subsumed the Roman Empire. During the early days on Liberty Plaza, actually, I felt like I was witnessing a glimpse of how Paul described his early church: the holding of all things in common, a single-minded asceticism, and local cells miraculously spreading throughout the known world. Living in societies far less religious than ours, thinkers on the European left are realizing that the loss of religious imagination can mean losing the capacity to imagine and take steps toward a radically different kind of society.

It’s hard to think of any place where religion’s revolutionary potential has been more fully realized than the United States—both for good and for evil. Many activists nowadays assume the completely non-empirical notion that religion in this country today is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Republican Party. But in truth this impression is the result of a very temporary and partial— if singularly effective— allience forged at the onset of the Reagan era. This alliance need not last. American religion is nothing if not funky with regard to politics, and highly troublesome to those in power.

+++ The colonial impulse itself, of course, originated among Puritan congregationalists—utopians who sought to create autonomous communities apart from monarchs. This impulse, further radicalized, gave us the concept of religious liberty and the legal right to free thought. In the decades before independence, anti-imperialist ideas spread through the revivals of the First Great Awakening. Quakers, working in leaderless and consensus-based communities, resisted conscription and oath-taking at the behest of the state; in the mid-19th century, they also led the crusade to abolish slavery. Facing discrimination and lack of access to services, Catholic immigrants created a whole system of parallel schools, hospitals, and charities. The Northeast of the 19th century was dotted with off-the-grid communes and experimental lifestyles, run according to the dictates of various religious and spiritual sects; it was from these that we get Americanisms from Shaker furniture to Graham Crackers. The insurrectionary and separatist Mormons emerged from this milieu as well, until being driven westward to found their socialist Zion in the desert, which they defended from the feds by force of arms.

These are not the exceptions of American religion; inventiveness, suspicion of authority, and autonomy are really right in the mainstream, however cleverly disguised for the sake of bourgeois decency. Want to see mutual aid? Look no further than the nearest suburban, nondenominational megachurch, where members find free day care, credit unions, employment services, good works for the poor, support in times of crisis, and access to a political machine.

While these political machines have tended of late to be co-opted by the 1%, in the past they were engines that helped drive (as well as suppress) the early labor movement, and women’s suffrage, together with just about every other political movement with any major impact on American history. And how could they not? About 14 million people belong to labor unions in the United States; closer to 120 million attend religious services regularly. Most of them, at least some of the time, are told in those services to do good, seek justice, and rescue the oppressed. Whether it’s on behalf of affordable housing or the unborn, or for an end to AIDS and human trafficking, religion represents an enormous proportion of how people in this country organize.

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of it unused. This could become available to the movement, and by means more diplomatic than the failed, forced occupations of church property tried in New York and, most recently, San Francisco. Far preferable, I would think, are Occupiers’ successes in defending from closure an historic black church in Atlanta and a Catholic homeless center in Providence.

Meanwhile, for a movement that has still failed to bring eviction-defense and anti-foreclosure action to a mass scale, civil disobedience groups provide the ideal platform for doing so: equip them with the right tools and strategies, and when some of their own are threatened by the banks, their fellow faithful will rally to save their homes—not merely on the basis of political ideology, but with the far more powerful motivation of looking out for the community. This kind of action also has special resonance in religious traditions, from the debt-forgiving Jubilee of the Hebrew scriptures, to the radical aid for those in need taught and practiced by Jesus Christ, to the ban on usury in Islamic law. An act may be civil disobedience by temporal standards, but to a higher law, resisting oppression is a basic requirement.

One need only think of the Civil Rights movement, arguably the last mass resistance movement in the U.S. to win decisive political gains. In it, churches were often the basic units of organizing. Clergy locked arms with activists at the front lines, and together they won.

The relationship between Civil Rights and churches, however, was not always a happy one. Southern clergy, both black and white, had learned to benefit from segregation, and a new Civil Rights organizer in town could represent a threat to their privileges. Saul Alinsky claimed that he never got anywhere appealing to clergy by the precepts of their faith.

“Instead,” he wrote, “I approach them on the basis of their own self-interest, the welfare of their Church, even its physical property.” An eminent religion reporter I know says he deals with them like he used to deal with the mob. The clergy-driven Occupy Faith network has been created to be an interface between the leaderless movement and the needs of professional religious leaders. It’s not an easy task, Occupy Faith’s organizers realize, but it needs to be done. The alliance between churches and civil rights organizations worked because miraculous people made clear that it had to.

While most religious communities don’t come anywhere near the Occupy standard for horizontality and transparancy—none does Occupy, for that matter—they’re not as bad as an outsider might think. The flock often finds plenty of ways of scaring the shepherd—from the power of the pocketbook, to steering committees and boards, to the threat of simply picking up and going elsewhere.

That’s why, as with unions, Occupy isn’t going to get anywhere with religious communities until it wins over the rank-and-file. Then, leaders will have to show support for the movement, or else.

+++ As I stood waiting for the action against Trinity Church to begin on December 17, I struck up a conversation with a man in a Roman collar and a black beret, Fr. Paul Mayer—a formerly married Catholic priest and veteran of every major American social justice movement since he marched with Martin Luther King in the 1960s. Trinity is an Episcopal church; I asked him what he thought would happen if OWS were making this demand of a Catholic one.

“’We’d be worse,” he replied.

I didn’t know it at the time, but, together with Episcopal Bishop George Packard and Sr. Susan Wilcox, a Catholic nun, Mayer was about to lead the charge over the fence, down onto Trinity property, and promptly into police custody. The following night, out of jail, he and Wilcox joined me and a lapsed cradle Catholic, a theologian, and a sociology student for the first meeting of Occupy Catholics at a bar near Zuccotti Park. We came together with a common but still not quite clarified desire to create an affinity group of Catholics involved with the movement, as well as to take what the movement was teaching us and bring it to our church. Maybe, someday, we could help Catholic churches respond better to Occupiers than Trinity did, and vice versa.

So far our emphasis has been on reaching out to laypeople, online and through the social justice ministries of nearby churches. We’ve held a general assembly at Maryhouse Catholic Worker, part of the organization Dorothy Day co-founded with Christian anarchist principles to serve the poor.

and struggle for justice and peace. For months we’ve been slowly growing, planning, and praying about how to lead our church, the biggest landowner in New York City, to join Occupy’s call for a more righteous society. We’ve been teaching Catholics about the movement and Occupiers about the long and deep Catholic social justice tradition. We got this group going because the connection between Occupy and our faith was so obvious we couldn’t ignore it. We needed this movement, and we know that the movement no less needs us.

This past Good Friday, the most solemn day of the Christian year, we stood in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral and sang, “Were you there when they crucified the poor?” against the bishops’ silence on a budget in Congress poised to slash services upon which the 99 percent depends. “We love our church,” we cried with the people’s mic, “and right now the church needs to speak.” So we did. Maybe next time we go to St. Patrick’s, we’ll be sleeping on the sidewalk.

corporations like Wells Fargo. Since 2008, the financial industry is paranoid about risk—more specifically, about minimizing it while still making a profit. But if the banks are the only ones monitoring their own risk, their destructive behavior will continue. We need to pressure them to behave ethically and sustainably. One way to do this is by causing a ruckus at their shareholder meetings. Banks are, however, preparing for this tactic. In a revealing move, many New York-based banks have decided not to hold their meetings in their home cities, within easy reach of protesters. Chase will have its shareholder meeting in Tampa, Florida, on May 15, on the same day that Morgan Stanley holds its shareholder meeting in Purchase, New York, thirty miles from of Manhattan. By contrast, on May 9, Bank of America will welcome shareholders at its headquarters—which happens to be in Charlotte, North Carolina. But not every criminal bank is fleeing to the hinterlands. On May 24, Occupiers in the New York area might wish to take a trip to nearby Jersey City, where a little company named Goldman Sachs will convene its shareholder meeting.

My experience in OSF Direct Action has taught me that nothing mobilizes the public as much as actions against banks. And the banks are feeling the heat. Earlier this year, shortly before I quit, I took part in a teleconference on “Environmental and Social Risks for 2012.” The purpose of the teleconference was to discuss how global social conditions might adversely affect investment opportunities. I was astonished when the Occupy movement was brought up and discussed at length: financial institutions now consider the public’s acute mistrust of banks to be an investment risk. As a result, the banks’ Investor Relations departments have been working overtime on a new PR strategy: Banks Care. In a society where personal liberties have eclipsed civic freedom, the financial institutions are hoping that a more pleasant “consumer experience” will quell our anger. Recently, when I went into a bank to pay my mortgage, the youthful teller asked me to rate him on his customer service skills while offering me a lollipop. The smiley 1% won.

We should remember to target the institutional investors, like the one that employed me, which enable the insanity by taking your retirement money and investing it in irresponsible

"OFFICE FORT" ILLUSTRATION BY ETHAN HEITNER
Panel convened at the Occupy Onwards conference
December 18, 2011
New School for Social Research, New York City
Panelists:
David Graeber, Debt: The First 5,000 Years
Mike Konczal, Roosevelt Institute
Brian Kalkbrenner, Occupy Student Debt
Sarah Jaffe, AlterNet
Moderator: Astra Taylor, OCCUPY Gazette
Transcribed by Elisabeth Asher

Astra Taylor: Hello, everyone; welcome to our hastily arranged conference. It’s really nice to see you all here.

So, debt. It’s nice to talk about this subject here at the New School, the institution responsible for my debt, the institution I have begrudged for the last decade, every month when I pay $400 in interest.

One of my favorite moments of Occupy Wall Street was the second or third night. I walked up to Zuccotti Park—it was early on, I was shocked that there were so many people there—I’m sort of walking along the corner of Broadway and Liberty, and there’s this guy, he’s playing a carnival Barker, and he says, “Step right up! Write down what you owe to the bank; write down what you’re worth to the 1%!” He had these huge sheets of paper, and he had probably, you know, two dozen markers, and people were writing down what they owed and what type of debt. I actually walked by and went into the park and had this weird hesitation about putting that number down—because I would have to think about it. I would have to think about how much money I owed. But, as we were leaving, I went and I took the marker and I wrote it down, and it was, $42,000. I felt sick to my stomach. Behind me, a girl who couldn’t have been more than 22 or 23 years old writes down $120,000 of student debt. And I thought, This is a radical moment, because we are articulating this number out loud, and we are putting it in a political context, and this is the moment I’ve been waiting for. I know that something was wrong with this, people haven’t been really discussing this issue. Something’s happening.

I’ll introduce the panelists as they talk. Brian Kalkbrenner is our representative from Occupy Student Debt. He’s also indebted—he has first-hand experience. I’d like to know, why now? A lot of us have been in student debt for years, and wondered why nobody was talking about it. Why is this issue suddenly on the public radar?

Brian Kalkbrenner: That’s a good question. And thanks for inviting me to speak. First of all, just let me say that I’m part of the Occupy Student Debt campaign, which came out of a working group of the Empowerment and Education working group at Occupy Wall Street, which Nicholas Mirzoeff spoke about earlier, if you were here. I am a student debtor. It’s funny, Astra, because, four months ago, I was talking with a friend of mine who got me involved in this campaign, and we were talking about this very thing. There’s a ready-made population to be radicalized in student debtors. Everybody I know suffers from it. When I talk to people about this campaign—even if they have nothing to do with OWS, they’re not radical people, they’re not activists—I talk to them about this campaign and instantly they say, “Oh man, student loans are so fucked.” Everybody knows this is a problem.

So why now? I don’t know. I can’t really answer it. But I want to talk a little bit about our campaign and some of the stats around student debt. Graduating seniors in 2010 carried an average debt of $25,000, while unemployment for that same group was at 9.1%. College tuition has increased more than 400% since the 1980s, with of course no appreciable increase in wages or inflation; it outstrips inflation. The debt default rate at for-profit institutions is 29%, and more than half of the student population at these for-profit colleges is African American or Latino. It’s a problem that affects the whole spectrum. Student loan debts are exceptional in that they’re afforded no protections. Student debtors are not protected from bankruptcy; student loan debt can follow you to the grave. As of 2005, benefits like Social Security can be garnished, which is unprecedented. It’s very easy for loans to double or triple in a period of ten years—you fall behind on a payment, suddenly there’s this whole chain of fees that is triggered, and you’re sort of like underwater trying to get back, just recovering those fees, and then you start paying the interest, let alone getting to the principle.

All that is to say that student loans are predatory loans. And they’re not loans taken out—you know, it’s not a privilege. There’s a view like, “Well, you know what you’re getting into, taking out student loans, you know, this is like a privilege problem.” Well, it’s not a privilege problem, for several reasons. One is that student debt has become a prerequisite in a knowledge economy. You have to take on student loan debt to get this degree, but then you graduate with this debt increasingly into an economy where you can’t get a job. So you’re already in a position of indenture-tude. The Occupy Student Debt campaign launched a few weeks ago, and it centers around a student debt pledge of refusal.

The pledge begins, “As members of the most indebted generations in history, we pledge to stop making student loan payments after one million of us have signed this pledge.” There’s also a pledge for faculty supporters; there’s a pledge for non-debtors, a non-debtor pledge of support. Pledges in the campaign are based around four principles:

1) That the federal government should cover the cost of tuition at public colleges and universities, which incidentally would be a price tag of about 70 billion dollars as of this year, which is a paltry sum actually—it sounds like a lot but it’s not.

2) We believe that any student loans should be interest-free. 3) We believe that private and almost all colleges and should be written off. Theirs are not a matter of public record. And finally, 4) the current student debt load should be written off.

Another thing we’re trying to do is change the language around the student debt debate. We’re not asking for forgiveness. We don’t believe that it’s something we should be forgiven for. There’s a lot of people defaulting on their student loans; there’s a lot of people buried by this debt. It’s an agonizing thing, when you’re making this decision whether to pay, like, this electricity bill, or my student debt bill. And I don’t know if you’ve been up against it, but I certainly have, and I’ve certainly chosen not to pay my student debt bill before, because, well, this other bill is more important. It’s sort of a harrowing experience for a lot of reasons, including feeling morally culpable, but you also just feel sort of helpless. And one of the things about this campaign is it provides a way for isolated debtors to join together in a collective body. And in doing that, in keeping with the spirit of OWS, we’re also not asking for any sort of reforms; we’re not asking for the powers that be to take a certain set of action. Rather we’re trying to change the landscape of the power structure itself and create a new empowered body, a political body. So if you’re interested, our URL is occupystudentdebt.com. The three pledges are there; there’s a lot of other information about it, and I’m sure more will come out as we talk.

Taylor: I wanted to, before we move on, maybe talk a little bit more about just how punitive student debt is. Because when you say you default on your student loans, it sounds like a fine and you’re finished, and get rid of it. I know the experience— that—I was very poor for a while, and I just stopped paying my student loans. And some months went by and I got a phone call, and they said, “You have not been paying your student loans, so we’ve added 19% to your principle.” Suddenly, overnight, like $12,000 more. So in other words, I couldn’t pay it, and they said, “You owe us more!” I don’t know if that was defaulting or what, but it definitely scared the shit out of me, which is why I never advise people to not pay their student loans. But what—you know, they can garnish your Social Security—what does it mean to default? What can they do to you?

Kalkbrenner: Well, they can do all kinds of things to you, I guess. The most important thing is that there are all sorts of traps built into the system so that if you miss a payment or fall behind—this number just grows exponentially. And then you find that a lot of the programs to, for example, reduce payment, you know, deferment and hardship programs—well, they’ll reduce your payment, but what they don’t really tell you or don’t emphasize is that in doing so, they do a kind of calculus which then increases your principle. Right? [Some laughter.] Yeah, see, some people know.

In garnishing wages, they can garnish up to 15% and that won’t count toward any forgiveness. In garnishing wages, they can garnish up to 15% and that won’t count toward any forgiveness. In garnishing wages, they can garnish up to 15% and that won’t count toward any forgiveness. So you’re already in a position to pay my student debt bill before, because, well, this other bill is more important. It’s sort of a harrowing experience for a lot of reasons, including feeling morally culpable, but you also just feel sort of helpless. And one of the things about this campaign is it provides a way for isolated debtors to join together in a collective body. And in doing that, in keeping with the spirit of OWS, we’re also not asking for any sort of reforms; we’re not asking for the powers that be to take a certain set of action. Rather we’re trying to change the landscape of the power structure itself and create a new empowered body, a political body. So if you’re interested, our URL is occupystudentdebt.com. The three pledges are there; there’s a lot of other information about it, and I’m sure more will come out as we talk.

Taylor: Next up is David Graeber, author of Debt: The First 5,000 Years. He’s going to take us in his time machine to the beginning! And it’s perfect to pick up on this word, “forgiveness.” We’re not asking for forgiveness, because one thing David discovers in his book is that morality and debt are always deeply entwined, and that it is a kind of pacifying concept. Maybe you could talk about the issue of primordial debt—are we primordial debt? Taylor:

Graeber: Okay, you want me to take that—

Taylor: Go.

Graeber: Oh, wow, okay—
Sidered standard practice if a new king came in, he would say, “All right, everything...

2000 and efforts to forgive Third World debt, they said, “Well, you owe us.” Which is...
with each other as well. But when it’s between social classes, suddenly it’s like a reli-
gious responsibility, it’s sacred, you can’t possibly imagine how could they be default-
ing! What we discovered in 2008 was that money, at this point, really is something
they just make up with their magic wands. It’s a series of promises, of IOUs that we
make with one another. It’s a social compact of a kind. When it’s really inconvenient,
trillions of dollars can be made to disappear. The fascinating thing is that they abso-
lutely refused to do it on the level of debts between big players and the little ones.

And this is why I think the sort of democratic core of this movement is debt and
debtors. The Middle Eastern revolts actually had a lot more to do with debt than
people let on. I always like to point out that Saudi Arabia actually did do a jubilee.
That was their reaction to the Arab Spring. Well, they, also doubled security forces.
But they took a two-handed approach. They also canceled all debts. Of course they
have a king; that makes it easier. They didn’t want to let it get out that they’d done this
because it would set a bad example, they figured. But it can still be done. The old solu-
tions are still available.

I wanted to throw that out, that we’re living in not historically unprecedented
times. I think we need to think a lot larger than we have. I think that has been gotten
on the table—the idea that once we understand that debts can be waived away, they
have been, they are being. If democracy is to mean anything, it means that who
makes promises to who, what promises are kept, and what promises are being negoti-
ated under what circumstances has to be democratically decided. It’s not a process
that only 1% of the population can weigh in on. Especially now that we’ve realized
that they’re not actually these amazing geniuses who are the only people who know
how that loan is going to go. They are actually completely incompetent at anything but
plundering and stealing.

Taylor: There’s a line in your book that says that it’s actually refusing to calculate that
makes us human.

Graeber: Yes. We’ve come to see all morality as debt because we’ve come to see all of
our relations in terms of exchange. This is something that has been brought on us, and
I think social science is just as guilty as economics in general. And one way that we can
start to imagine the world where we’re all debtors is to realize that many of
our everyday interactions use completely different logic than economists talk about. I
always like to say that communism is not some ideal, that it might exist at some point in
the future; it’s the way most of us act with people we really care about all the time.

A third of what we do is communistically organized, a third of it, often inside the
family, hierarchically or do something about that—and a third of it is exchange. The part of the economy where debt is even a meaningful term is a fairly slim portion. A lot of things that we’re talking about here might sound crazy
and utopian, but they’re not. Communist relations are the basis for all sociality. By
reimagining them in terms of debt, we just throw ourselves into these series of logical
traps, communistic relations, the basis for all morality. By reimagining them in terms of
debt, we just throw ourselves into these series of logical traps, religious thinkers who thought about your debt to the cosmos, or
were forced to before saying, well, that doesn’t really work.

Taylor: Crazyl and utopian Mike Konczal, from the Roosevelt Institute. We’re going to
get back in the time machine and come back to the present day. We have a left right
now that’s organized around higher wages and job security—and here we are talking
about debt. What are the opportunities, what are the risks of that—and any chance for
a jubilee in 2012?

Konczal: One of the things I like to emphasize is that when it comes to—you know,
there’s obviously a lot of meta discussions about demands and what does the Occupa-
tion want—when it comes to debt, specifically when it comes to housing and student
debt, we know a lot of things we can do, at the federal level, at the state level, at the
local municipality level. Back in the 2008 primary, candidate Hillary Clinton pro-
posed a moratorium on foreclosures; candidate Obama was looking at existing foreclo-
ruptcies, which he did not follow through on when he was elected. But we know things we
can do. There are liberal wonks who can bore you to death with white papers. The
problem is that, as we discussed a little earlier, debt is not seen as a political issue.

It’s not seen as something that has gone out of whack. It’s not seen as something that
necessitates a political response.

But the debt market is really a function of the government. If you look at the
Constitution, our bankruptcy code is directly in there. The founders were very aware
of what that does. Besides slavery, more than half of all white people who came to the
British colonies were indentured when they came here. They were very conscious of
what that contract looks like. We talk about makeshift jubilees, right? Everything is
kind of out of whack so they declare game over, they hit the reset button on debts.
If you look at 19th-century U.S. bankruptcy law, it looks exactly the same way. There
were severe financial crises, severe depressions and recessions. And we just created
the new bankruptcy code out of thin air and said, “You know what, all this stuff you
couldn’t declare bankruptcy on before? You can do it now.” They did it in the 1890s.
There were two or three years of readjustments, things went through the courts, and
then the economy started picking up again. It was very common. We did a similar
thing in the Great Depression.

So what are the two main mechanisms we have under our economy in America
to deal with too much debt? There are two primary ways: one is the bankruptcy
code, and the other is inflation. Inflation balances the interests; it’s a way of handling
money that balances the interest between debtors and creditors. It puts the economy
on a maddening path where the claims of these giant securitization bonds, and they’re supposed
toward the claims of the future. The Fed could be doing more to balance the interest
towards debtors, to generate more growth or inflation. They are choosing not to. So,
toward the claims of the future. The Fed could be doing more to balance the interest
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Khimki

On our way to defend the forest
I thought about powerlessness.
In my mind I turned over the old thought about how
the use of weapons is the sign of powerlessness.
That’s what I was thinking about
when a division of the OMON riot police started coming to us, and everyone
freaked out, not from a philosophical but from a very earthly and real feeling of
powerlessness.
I giddily recalled a line from some anarchist manifesto
about how only those who have weapons
are able to philosophize about pacifism.
If they just gave us some weapons, I thought, we could really do some great philoso-
phizing about pacifism.

And then suddenly from this apex of our powerlessness a weapon appeared:

We parted, and from out of this mass of student-pacifists,
useless intellectuals and local pensioners,
a machine gun started firing.
The OMON troops started falling
like the trees of the Khimki forest.
But the main thing is for there to be no revolution,” said the environmentalist
Evgenia Chirikova,
as we stood over the bloody troops of the riot police wondering what to do next.

“There were fewer people killed during the October Revolution
than there were today,” I said.

“But then consider how many people were killed during the civil war,”
said Mikhail, next to me.

“That’s because the army and the police didn’t come over to the side of the people,”
said someone else nearby,
and then we drank a little vodka,
we all drank for the police and the army
to come over to the side of the people,
that is to say our side,
and at that moment we saw on the highway,
dressed up as OMON fighters
in camouflage suits the color of the forest,
our reinforcements were on their way.

- Kirill Medvedev, translated by Keith Gessen

those two places are housing debt, and student debt. For housing debt, you cannot
reset a mortgage in bankruptcy. There’s a long debate why this is, but for a primary
residence, you can’t do it. If you have a vacation home you can do it; if you have an
investment property, you can do it. If you’ve ever heard “cram down”—that’s one kind
of inartful term—that is the change they were trying to make. They tried to make it in
’09. Larry Summers, Tim Geithner, and President Obama chose not to push it. A lot
of progressive senators tried to make it a condition for TARP. Larry Summers said,
“No, it doesn’t need to be; we’ll get it later.” They showed no interest in doing this.
An absolute shameful act of the Obama Administration. If he loses the election next year,
it’ll be mostly because of this, because I think it’s been a huge check on the economy.

Most of the really creative economic theory work going on right now explaining this
debtor relief is looking at existing OMON levels, and they’re looking at places where foreclo-
sures happen. And they say, you know what—now, to you, this may not be shocking,
but if you’re an economist who deals with a lot of abstract models, this might be kind of
shocking—places that are hugely indebted are not having a lot of growth. They’re
not really healthy economic regions. Some people might win a Nobel Prize for this;
I just want you to be ready for it. Because, from their point of view, every debtor has a
creditor, and if the debtor’s struggling and drowning, the creditor’s going to be
bouncing around, even happier. That’s actually not how it happens. So you’re seeing
a lot more mainstream people—William Galston of Brookings, a senior economic
wonk there, is calling for debt relief on housing. This is very shocking, right; this is
not stuff you normally hear [from a centrist think tank]. So you’re looking there, and
you’re seeing that housing debt is really detrimental: Foreclosures have huge costs
to municipalities; they have huge costs to communities; they have huge costs to
the people who go through them.

I want to emphasize one quick thing that wasn’t quite addressed by the previous
panel: Why are so many foreclosures happening? Why isn’t the system naturally fixing
itself? At one of the Republican debates, I think it was Jon Huntsman who said some-
thing like, “The banks are ripping off people in foreclosure.” And someone else said,
“Well, why would the banks rip off someone? Because they would get screwed too.

But it’s an important question to really understand. The same predatory model that
created all this bad stuff is the same model—it’s the same exact people, and it’s the
same logic that’s supposed to try to mediate it now that it’s all collapsed. And, as we’re
finding, they’re both irresponsible and incompetent in doing it. So Wall Street essen-
tially acts as middlemen for these giant securitization bonds, and they’re supposed
to handle these mortgages when they go bad. However, they’re paid first, out of any
claim that happens afterward. They have no incentive to make sure these things work
out. So if you’re paid first, and you have no penalty if something goes under, what are
you going to do? You are going to try to drive someone into bankruptcy; you’re going
to try to drive the most fees on them, because you get paid those fees first.
So if you are a community activist and you're looking at communities saying, this bank is incredibly aggressive in trying to get this person into foreclosure, even though, "Why do they want to own a home that's going to be worth nothing with no one in it? It's going to collapse." The answer is they don't care; they're incentivized to do that.

There are a lot of ways to target that. In addition to forcing people to foreclosure very quickly, they're not creating the right paperwork necessary to foreclose—this is what you hear about the robo-signing scandals. If you're going to be involved with Occupy Foreclosure, it's worth taking a weekend and just educating yourself on what we're referring to as foreclosure fraud. There has been a lot of pressure on it—Smith at Naked Capitalism writes a lot about it; Dave Dayen at Firedoglake; the Huffington Post has done quite a bit of great work on it. Essentially, the banks are not even bothered to do the basic legal minimum. So what does that mean? Dave Dayen talked to the Recorder of Deeds in North Carolina—his real name is one of the most boring civil servants you can imagine. But this guy became—in some small circles that I follow—Public Enemy #1 of the banks, because he actually went into the deeds and said, "You know, the banks have destroyed all these records. They haven't submitted any of them correctly, and everything's kind of wrong about them." The amazing thing is that after he started asking questions, he was invited to meet President Obama two weeks later; it's a totally amazing story.

The Attorney General in Nevada said, "We're going to pass a law saying, if you submit incorrect documents for foreclosure, that's a criminal penalty—and it actually sort of was already one, but we're going to rephrase that so we will enforce it now." The moment he said that the next week foreclosures stopped entirely. And when the banks realized they had to do a lot of paperwork, they actually had to hire a lot of people, which is why unemployment is down, and in capitalism they take it through the wage, in these subtle ways. It seems like it's shifting more toward the former thing. The government is letting these guys bribe the government to make laws where they can pick your pocket, and that's pretty much it. The best figures I've seen indicate that maybe 19 to 20% of incomes are now going—if you count interest payments, if you count all these fees they put in there, if you count insurance fees, if you add everything up—they're taking about a fifth of your total life income. For nothing. For financial services of one kind or another. And of course, that hits some people more than others. So if you're looking at these gross numbers, that means that for anybody who isn't prosperous, it's a lot more.

The other interesting thing I saw, however, is that that number has shrunk really rapidly. I saw 13% actually goes in interest payments—13% of people's income—and that went down to 9% in two years since 2008. There is massive popular resistance on the individual level, just detaching yourself as much as possible from credit card debt, from the other more extortionate payment loans, other more extortionate forms. So to that extent, just doing, just not paying. People are cutting back, and these are the best gross numbers I've seen; figures; it was crazy—it went up, up, up, and then [exploding noise] like that, over the last two years. The challenge is giving political voice to what people are already doing by pointing out that they're not alone, and also just pointing out what's going on.

Taylor: Okay, it's question time. We have a few minutes here for questions.

Audience member 1: I just have a question regarding the tuition raise: Why is it 400% within the past twenty years? Is there a logical, layman's term answer for that?

Kalkbrenner: I don't know if there's a simple answer for that. But it's a good question—I'll point out that up until the 70s, CUNY was free. And so was the University of California system. There's a lot of reasons why wages are stagnant and why the increase is so much, but it's interesting—at the Baruch action last month, which happened last month, and the Baruch campus was literally an regime that these students were being attacked by—we were walking it to, I overheard somebody saying, "That's the big deal? It's $300?"—because CUNY had voted to increase tuition by $300 every year for the next five years—and so, well, anybody who knows, anybody who is in debt knows that the difference between paying one bill and another bill, and to the point that paying that $1,500, is a hell of a lot of money, especially for what's supposed to be a university which serves a low-income and also middle-income student body.

Jaffe: I was not that recently a graduate student and also a teaching assistant. One of the things about these university tuition increases is that the place they're not going is in professors’ pockets. The place that they are definitely going is in administrators’ pockets. Universities are moving in large part, especially public universities like the one I taught at, to teaching assistants and adjunct professors who don't have health insurance, don't have benefits, make three grand a semester, and they're cutting down on permanent faculty. So then, on the other side of that equation: you're not only paying more money, you're getting a worse product.

Konzel: I just want to throw out a quick point just as background—a lot of pre-Zucotti Park occupations, globally, have been about student debt. If you look in Chile over the last couple years, if you look in Puerto Rico—which is part of the United States—but—if you look at Britain last year, if you look at Berkeley in 2009, "Occupying Everything, Demand Nothing"—student debt is obviously a real crucible of where a lot of this energy is, so it’s exciting to see it come back to the campus.

Graber: I was involved in the occupations in the UK last year. It's a basic moral question of value, of why we're even here—not only here in this room, but here at all. It was fascinating to see, because they're trying to put in place in the UK the system that we already have in America. It started with this thing called the Brown Report, where
they did an analysis of educational efficiency, based on the assumption that no one would ever pursue a degree in higher education for any reason other than increasing their average life income. Then they proposed all these horrific neo-liberal reforms, like, we’ll triple tuition and put in student loans, which basically had the effect of making sure that people actually would be forced to act in exactly the way that the Brown Report described. You really had no choice, now, to calculate everything in terms of your life income, because you were going to be in debt for the rest of your life. That was the point.

Every single occupation began with—it wasn’t a demand, but a statement—the statement that education is not an economic good, it’s a moral good: it’s a good unto itself. It’s a crazy that positions that used to be conservative positions—I mean, you could say, “Education is necessary if you’re going to have a democracy; people need to be informed.” You could say, “Education is economically necessary;” if you’re a neo-liberal. But what about, “Education is good.” It’s better to understand the world than not to understand the world? That used to be what conservative people said. And now just trying to make this argument makes you a crazed radical.

What I really think has happened to the talk of education in particular is a question of value. An educational system is where you explore any value other than the economic, where it’s okay to do so. For most people, you live a life for a few years where you get to think about something other than money. And the guys running the money completely fucked up the entire system. They almost sent the economic system of the world crashing to its knees. It’s clearly a moment where people start thinking of other ways of thinking about things, other things being important in life, other ways of transferring the economy—where’s that going to come from? The educational system. So the first thing they do is—splat—attack the educational system head-on, to make sure nobody in that system can think about anything except the terms that have already been set up. It’s just using brute force to enforce ideological hegemony. We need to recognize that that’s what’s going on.

Audience member 1: I really like this idea of debt as a political thing; I signed the faculty pledge. I teach at a small private college, and we announced this. We were basically shunned and silenced by the rest of the faculty members who said that we were pushing students to be irresponsible. And as an educator, I feel kind of responsible, because I’m not going to be there when the student will be defaulting and her wages are garnished. I’m not taking my signature back, but I still feel responsible, and how do we solve this ethical dilemma? Because I’m not going to be there when the student is in trouble.

Audience member 2: This is a devil’s advocate question, mainly for David Graeber, but if anybody else wants to answer it, feel free. Current crisis aside, is the goal, in your mind, a society where if someone gives you a truck and you said you’re going to pay them $50,000, and then you don’t want to or can’t, people shouldn’t expect that you feel obligated to fork over the cash at any point in the future? Is that sort of the goal?

Graeber: No, I’m not saying that. I’m saying we need to rest our entire conception of what money is, of what people’s relationships are. Basically what a debt is making a promise, making it impermanent and quantifiable, enforcing it coercessively and therefore making it transferable, which is arguably what money is, too. They’re deeply entangled in one another. It is the nature of all promises that they are both commitments one makes to another person and also, if circumstances radically change, they get to be renegotiated. You can make a system where they can’t be, by this combination of math and violence. What I’m talking about is bringing us away from the strange idea that these particular types of promise that are framed in math and backed up in violence are somehow more sacred than promises that one makes to someone which represent an actual type of trust, which, by nature, are renegotiated if circumstances change. If you lend your brother $50,000 for a truck, and your brother suddenly gets wiped out by a flood, you’re going to take that into consideration. So, the jubilee—if we have a system that’s utterly out of whack, it’s a way of setting the reset button. How we then renegotiate obligations to each other, what sort of promises we make to each other in a truly free society is a very interesting question, and I don’t think it’s going to be just in some kind of a nebulous sense, but it’s part of the rubric of how we conduct our affairs. I just wanted to add on a little bit about this what David was saying. I was a part of the University of the last one and I saw student debt in the student protests—hi, David. Just one of the things about the 9,000 pound a year fees—the government set that as an upper limit in order to introduce an element of competition within the education system so that some can charge higher than others, and, of course, all universities now are going to charge the top fee because nobody wants to be left behind. It’s a contest to see who can get the best deal. So, Congress has ordered you to get the best deal. What the interesting thing about this is, now, that the government, who are the ones who have to underpin all of the loans that the students are going to have to take out, aren’t going to be able to afford to provide those loans in the first place. Therefore students default, the government is going to default, and I think what we’re going to try to do is push something very similar to what you’re doing here, a mass non-payment campaign, because we know they work—it worked over the poll tax riots in Britain—and we know that what we have to do is push the political agenda forward. We know that they can afford our education; they can afford to bomb Libya, so we’d have to turn it around on that. The final thing really is that this came to a head last year when we challenged the Librarians in the Philippines who put out a document—“Fine, you can keep the promise”—and I think something similar is going to happen here. All these politicians in the parliamentary system will just say whatever they think you want to hear in the rankings, the election, so we must hold them to account at all times, which has been well done here over. It’s been so inspiring. Thanks.

Graeber: I was going to add to that. During the first protests over the tuition hikes, an affinity group I was actually produced these things called Lib-Dem promises—notes—you know, “I promise to pay...” We figured, well, just pay your student loans. That’s it. It’s a promise that no one can break. There was a contest to see who can get the lowest interest rate on student debt—why is it that everybody says, “Oh, if you were to cancel debts, who’d make a loan, come on, the economy would suffer,” but nobody ever says, “If politicians break their promises to people—because they think that you have to pay debts to bankers and that’s much more important—well, nobody’s going to vote, and that’ll be the end of the world.” Even though that’s exactly what happens. Why is one thing considered, “Oh, you can’t break that,” and the other is just made to be broken, even though we’re all a democratic society. Taylor: So there were a few questions that were directed at you, and then there’s the question of professorial authority to student debt and solidarity with students, and I feel like that’s an interesting thing to think about.

Kalkbrenner: I’ll just say really quickly that’s a criticism that’s been leveled at us. In fact, one of the professors involved with the campaign, there was a call from—I believe it was the Chronicle of Higher Education—a columnist called for a gage order on him, which was great publicity for us and did a lot of work for us in the mind. I think I would say this: We’re not encouraging students to default, and we’re not encouraging debtors to default either; we’re encouraging debtors to take action. The pledge calls for people to refuse payment after a million people have signed the pledge. When a million people sign that pledge, the landscape is going to be radically different. Whatever the penalties are that looming at that point, the momentum will be in our corner. So we need to think in terms of what it’ll look like, not what it looks like now.

Konczal: The thing about a debtor strike, especially student loan strike, is that if you compare it to the logic of a factory strike—why does a factory strike work? It’s because the capitalist, the owner of the factory, wants the factory to be running. The first day he shows up and no one’s producing anything, he’s really upset. And then it’s a contest to see who can hold out the longest for what favorable terms. The first day with a debt strike: Well, credit cards are the easiest things. If you miss a credit card payment, fees go up, your rates get jacked up, the owner of the debt is actually happy! It’s a long story but it’s pretty obvious: He can just jack up the amount you owe to him at that point. The same is true about student loans, like the story that Astra opened with. At the beginning of the strike, no one’s mad. The capitalist, who’s
essentially the rentier in this case, is not upset about it; he’s happy about it. It goes with what David is saying—are we really in a capitalist society at this point with all this kind of stuff? Or is it more like a feudal society, where the idea of the debts growing is actually very favorable to an ownership class? That’s actually the case of mortgage debt, too.

The other thing is about who’s on the other side—it’s the government; it’s us. We backstop most of the student debt. Why is that problematic? Well, there are things that social democrats like about having the government do things—it has a long time frame; it can print money; it has coercive abilities and compulsion. The flipside of that is that when the government uses those powers to become your debt collector, it’s incredibly repressive. They will find you wherever you go. They can take money out of your old age pension. They ultimately have no timeframe and no horizons, so you can wait you out. Whereas a normal credit card company would try to get your money and to get you out the door, the government has an infinite timeframe for the person’s collection. So it’s a much more vicious type of debt collection. That’s one of the reasons why breaking the student loan models we have right now has to be one of the highest priorities for us.

Gearey: I think that we have to think of the system in a global context, absolutely, and we haven’t been emphasizing that here but I think all of us are well aware of that. We have this paradoxical situation, where you have what some refer to as debt imperialism. Well there’s an old joke: If you owe a bank a hundred thousand dollars, the bank owns you; if you owe a bank a hundred million dollars, you own the bank. It’s sort of the same thing. If Mozambique owes money to the U.S., Mozambique is in trouble. If the U.S. owes money to Japan, Japan’s in trouble. It really depends on who’s got the guns. I’ve actually traced it out—you can look at the increase of the U.S. deficit, the increase of the proportion of it that’s held abroad, and the increase in U.S. military spending. It’s exactly the same curve. So basically what’s happening is that foreigners are paying for the U.S. military that sits on top of them by making loans that are never paid, and just rolled over at a loss, and through Treasury bonds which act like gold and replace gold as the reserve currency of the world banking system, mainly spearheaded first by West Germany, when they were occupied by the U.S. Then Japan, Korea, the Gulf States, China, even countries like Brazil are getting in on the game. (Of course it’s complicated. China seems to have a long-term strategy to hollow out the U.S. and turn it into a military enforcer for East Asian capital.) We have this curious system whereby the U.S. has this gigantic empire, which we can’t call an empire, the places that we occupy are sending us money, which we can’t call tributes so we call it a loan. And somehow we’re supposed to think this is just a problem with the balance of trade! “These guys are just sending us more stuff than we’re sending them, and it’s a real problem, isn’t it? We need to really do something about that. It has nothing to do with the fact that we have this gigantic army sitting on top of them.” If you suggest ways that it might, you’re a wing nut.

We need to really make those connections—the whole money system has been linked to military systems for at least since the foundation of the Bank of England in 1694 and really much further back. That’s one of the things that an analysis of capitalism hasn’t really adequately addressed, how all those things are interlocked. I think that system is in crisis right now—that link between the military and what they call deficits and the IMF and the other things that they make up for the economic advantage, for being the guy who decides what money is. Which is essentially one of the big bases of American global power. It always seems to accrue to the guy with the biggest army. There is a crisis of that. We tried to pass off the crisis of the 70s onto the Third World. They bought back relatively successfully—the IMF has been kicked out, has come home. What we’re really witnessing, I think, in all of these social movements—and this is really a cheap cartoon version—is the struggle over the dissolution of the American empire and what’s going to replace it. I think we have reason to be optimistic. Because look at Europe! They lost their colonial empire; it’s not like the rich grabbed all the cookies. They ended up with health care and social security and the welfare state.

[Inaudible question from the audience]

Well, yeah, the immediate effects were pretty good. I’ll take thirty years of progress. The dissolution of empires does not necessarily mean that the 1% grabs everything. They’re certainly trying. But I think that’s the ground on which we’re fighting.

[Inaudible question from the audience]

Well, it didn’t lead to universal revolution but it sure did change.

[Inaudible question from the audience]

Oh, absolutely! Nobody’s denying that. What we’re saying is that the dissolution of direct empires does not mean that the ordinary people in the country get screwed. I’m not saying there aren’t still imperialistic structures. What I’m saying is that you can have political developments that are salutary for both sides. It’s not like the imperial structures are totally gone; it’s just that Europe was tagging along after the American empire at that point, and now we need to get rid of that. What I am saying is that progress can be made. The working class does not have a stake in the empire to the degree that it thinks it does, is basically what I’m saying.

NATASHA LENNARD

Occupy & Failure

What a long chain of failures Occupy has been over the past seven months. Think about it: It didn’t shut down Wall Street on September 17th; it couldn’t set up camp in its first-choice location, Chase Manhattan Plaza; it barely marched a third of the way across the Brooklyn Bridge roadway before getting kettled; the Oakland General Strike did not exactly generalize; and occupations have been driven from plazas, squares, vacant buildings, and sidewalks across America. Again and again, plans of action have not materialized as projected.

You might expect me to counter this list of defeats with a list of successes—perhaps the many homes saved from foreclosure, or the shift in national debate to address inequality, or the money moved out of Bank of America. (If you were expecting such a list, you were wrong—but in an article about derailed expectations, that seems only appropriate.) No, I am not interested in Occupy’s list of achievements here; as we approach May 1st and the planned general strike, I want to focus on Occupy as a string of failures.

The media narrative ahead of May Day is already settled on a fulcrum of success or failure. The headline placed atop a recent article I wrote for Salon, about how Occupy is rethinking general strike as a tactic, read “Can Occupy pull off a general strike?” Other articles ask, “Will May Day reignite the movement?” Editors, pundits, and participants alike want to know what success might look like on May 1st, and whether we’ll see it. I suggest instead that what we writers, strikers, and speculators have in mind as a successful May Day now should not matter in the least. Indeed I hope for a May Day, which—like other Occupy actions have—orient us how we feel about failure and success altogether.

Queer theorist Judith Halberstam pointed out in her explorations of failure and success that failure, simply put, “connotes effort without achieving the desired result.” As such, broadly speaking, Occupy—the weird, ever shifting assemblage of actions, gatherings, and connections that it is—technically avoids the logic of success and failure altogether. The consistent refusal to pose demands or set out specific goals as a movement means there has never been a “desired result” to achieve or fail to achieve in the first place. But that’s speaking about Occupy as a (loose) whole. Different Occupy groups have certainly set out plans (crossing the Brooklyn Bridge to set up camp on the other side on October 1st, stopping the Stock Exchange bell ringing on November 17th, occupying Union Square overnight to name a few New York examples)—and they’ve failed. Granted, they succeeded in escalating energy and garnering media attention, but in terms of enacting a plan or stated goal, these actions were duds.

However, as many people who experienced some of those events might attest with me, these failures constitute some of Occupy’s greatest wins. It was during these days, when chaotic crowds surged into the streets and moved en masse, that the Occupy movement was able to move beyond the foundations of bourgeois politics, and to question the foundations of success and failure.
It is Wednesday evening, and I am sitting with several dozen dissidents in the packed main room of the Lancaster Ave Autonomous Zone (LAVA), a West Philly meeting-place for local radicals. Tonight’s speaker is Selma James, a lifelong activist and author best known for having founded the Wages for Housework campaign in the 1970s, who has come over from London to address the Occupy movement face to face—and to promote a new book of mostly old writings, Sex, Race, and Class—The Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings 1952-2011 (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).

The winter months had taken their toll on the Occupy movement, drawing out divisions to the point of outright conflict—between reformists and revolutionaries, socialists and anarchists, all the familiar shades of internecine dispute. James’s visit was intended to energize a different sort of debate, one centered on women, their enemies and allies; to that end, she would preside over a special women-led general assembly the following night in celebration of International Women’s Day. Whereas the session at LAVA stuck mostly to matters of theory, Thursday’s GA would address the role of women in Occupy and in the radical milieu more broadly, a topic on which James has long been an authority. Her 1972 pamphlet, co-authored with Mariarosa Dalla Costa, The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community, argues that feminism and anti-capitalism cannot be considered as separate struggles; to destroy capitalism means overcoming the economic domination of women in all spheres, even in the trade unions and other enclaves of working-class power. (Not incidentally, The Power of Women was read collectively by a group of occupiers in the first weeks of the Philly encampment.

The argument sketched out by James and Dalla Costa begins by exposing a blindspot in Marx’s analysis of capitalism: the domestic sphere and the unpaid work of housewives. Supporting the above-ground system of production and waged labor is, they suggest, a sub-level of social reproduction, wherein care-taking, cooking, cleaning, and sexual service are combined to produce and maintain the worker as a creature fit to work. After all, it is only in the mists of fantasy (implicitly quite popular, nonetheless) that the workingman arrives self-constituted at the factory gates; in

There is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing and all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well to bring down the winner. Let’s leave success and its achievement to the Republicans, to the Matthew Barneys of the world, to the winners of reality TV shows, to married couples, to SUV drivers. The concept of practicing failure, perhaps, prompts us to discover our inner Sweatheart, to be under-achievers, to fall short, to get distracted, to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose our way, to forget, to avoid mastery and to [as Walter Benjamin put it] “withhold empathy from the victors.”

Looking ahead to May 1st, different individuals and groups are anticipating events and hoping for a multitude of different outcomes—there is no one idea shared even among organizers who have been collaborating to plan what a successful general strike would constitute that day. There’s at base a shared desire to see a huge number of people stopping work and taking to the streets that day, but that’s where it ends. It’s tempting to align with the media narrative and worry in advance about whether May Day will be a success, and what “success” here might mean. It’s better, perhaps, to keep in mind our beautiful and shared failures over the past six months. Indeed, with the fierce police repression meeting even the calmest of Occupy mobilizations these days, failure is in many ways unavoidable. We can, however, keep planning, pushing and finding each other; we can, in the words of Samuel Beckett, “fail better” and in so doing hopefully shatter whatever staid ideas of success we’re currently harboring.
CINZIA ARRUZZA AND FELICE MOMETTI

General strike: the exception which should become the rule

Since the start of the Occupy movement, the two calls for a general strike—November 2nd, and now May Day—have provided OWS with a rich opportunity for discussion. Under the Taft-Hartley Act, passed by Congress in 1947, general strikes and political strikes are illegal in the United States. The last general strike to take place in this country was in Oakland in 1946: Over two days, 130,000 workers refused to work in solidarity with a strike by 400 mostly female retail clerks. Sixty-six years later, the solidarity strike and the general strike remain illegal; nonetheless, the calls have been treated with some seriousness by the movement—enough, at least, to give occasion for teach-ins, reading groups, and numerous articles, often editorializing—polemicizing, even—on everything from the history of the general strike, its potential impact (or impending failure) on May 1, whether or not a call need be endorsed by the unions, and how the act itself might be reimagined for our contemporary era. Yet what’s at stake in these discussions is something larger than a question of tactics. Ultimately what these debates reveal is the question of the new class composition and of the relationship between class composition and forms of politicalization and struggle. In our view, four recent articles in particular exemplify some of the prominent attempts to rethink the meaning of the general strike in connection with the transformations in the functioning of capitalism. We’d like to summarize them briefly here.

A few days before the West Coast’s December 12 port blockade, the anti-capitalist site Bay of Rage published “Blockading the port is only the first of many last resorts” (authorship unattributed). To construct its analysis of the port blockade and of the previous general strike in Oakland, the article relies on a few broad theoretical assumptions: First, the distinction—opposition, even—between the proletariat, characterized by dispossession and unemployment, and the working class, characterized by work, exploitation, and the capacity to produce value. Second, the centrality of the sphere of circulation over the sphere of production in contemporary capitalism. And third, the notion that the proletariat should refuse to articulate demands and instead “provide for themselves” whatever is needed. What the analysis implies is that the movement should focus on the mobilization of the proletariat, implicitly recognized as the new revolutionary subject, in contrast with the working class, and in particular with unionized workers.

In “Longview, Occupy, and Beyond: Rank and File and the 89% Unite,” the Seattle-based Black Orchid Collective offer a more nuanced analysis of the West Coast port shutdown, invoking the term “the 89%” to refer to the non-unionized sector of the working class, and to insist that the non-union member can and should play a crucial role in class struggle. Class composition has undergone significant changes in the last few decades, they argue—the rising rate of unemployment and underemployment, the feminization of the labor force, the rise of precariousness, and deindustrialization are all realities of contemporary working conditions. While they do not deny the importance of unions and of rank and file...
defined here as a total refusal of capitalism in all arenas of the life-world: “Our struggle against the factory is not only to get out but never to go in. Our struggle against the family is to get out, but not so we are free for the factory. This is our demand for autonomy, our autonomous class perspective, founded in this total rejection of the capitalist organization of our lives.”

Much of the autonomist program would appear to have been revived by the Occupy movement, from the creation of self-managed kitchens, medical units, and power generators to the political process of mass assembly and consensus. Self-organization was always a constitutive feature of Autonomia Operaia (which translates as “worker autonomy”), squatted social centers and pirate radio stations were everywhere in the 1970s and 80s in Italy. But beyond this point, the resemblance ends. Occupy puts an emphasis on public space and communal living that is wholly absent in autonomist Marxism, which remained focused on class struggle in the factories and in space at large. Even though it considered the plight of the unemployed and students, it nonetheless placed all these struggles under the newly expanded category of “labor.” The same can be said of Wages for Housework: whereas James and her comrades focused on the sphere of reproduction, for Occupy, the site of struggle includes production and reproduction, but also non-production. Occupiers have laid claim to the no-man’s-land of empty plazas and “privately-owned public spaces,” resisting clear-cut distinctions of sex, race, and class. In New York, OWS has claimed the status of an amorphous assembly of 99 percenters, while in Oakland, occupiers have proclaimed themselves a self-sustaining, self-defending commune, reviving the memory of Paris, 1871 (without, again, the emphasis on specifically workers’ commune). The result has been a movement with an unusual potential for openness, a space for categories to be sloughed-off and reassumed at will.

For the same reasons, however, Occupy finds itself faced with a new set of obstacles—or rather, with old obstacles confronted anew. Thursday evening’s GA concluded with a speak-out session for women occupiers: many of whom decided to issue with the sexual division of labor within Occupy. Two organizers, both heavy lifters in Occupy Philly, pointed out that despite the movement’s rhetoric of fairness and equality, the burden of reproductive work—the tasks of caring, cleaning, keeping on schedule, mending bruises, resolving disputes, and so on—has consistently devolved to women. “When we are exhausted and no longer speak up, we can be permitted to say, ‘Get it from the men,’ as though there is no other option: no one else is willing to do the labor of caring. That the same can be said of Occupy—not always, but often enough—is no compliment to the organization, and emphasize that to the sisters, and therefore the class.

There is a lesson in this for Occupy in its moment of springtime awakening. If we cannot organize ourselves in ways that elevate care above a narrow conception of work, recognizing the work of reproduction as what it is—as labor—then we might as well quit now. Care, James tells us, is the mark of civilization; to be deprived of the experience of caring is to be deprived of one’s humanity. That the Occupy movement has made care a priority—and more than a priority, a rallying point and an ethic—is evidence of its potential. If we can be permitted that term; for if it is not good to provide eye wash to strangers during a tear gas attack, or food to the hungry, or calming words in the midst of crisis, then nothing is good. But if these tasks remain the de facto burden of women, then there will not be enough goodness yet to warrant celebration. Or to say it another way: that it is not good to provide care means that it is a movement of and for women, and of and for all of us whom care has civility.

This might require us to fight for welfare as James is advocating, but it might also provoke a more radical refusal of capitalism and its governmental protectorates: resistance with care, not chaos, as its objective. Thankfully, some women in Occupy (and in the whole movement) are making space for this conversation. We will not doubtwidens as James’s speaking tour continues. Now that warm weather has returned, perhaps we will hear her slogan echoing on the human microphone: Power to the sisters, and therefore the class.

mobilizations, they reject the idea that unionism is the only means of organization, and emphasize that mobilization efforts need to focus on the non-organized component of the working class (the large majority of the active working class in addition to the unemployed).

Not surprisingly, the views published in the Socialist Worker depart significantly from the two previous analyses. Citing the article from Bay of Rage, Geoff Bailey and Kyle Brown argue in “The Rise of the ‘Precariat’” that the movement projects to “update” the theory of the general strike do not represent an advance for the movement, but a retreat. Precarity, instability, unemployment, and underemployment do not newly characterize the working class, they claim; nor has the working class ever comprised a static, homogeneous group. Capital has always and consistently undermined labor and forms of labor control, and the present weakness of the working-class movement is not a permanent structural problem, but instead one of politics and organization. To build the movement stronger requires forging links between the Occupy movement and the workers at the point of production.

The fourth tendency is reflected in Gayatri Spivak’s “General Strike,” first published in Tidal. For Spivak, the strike is, in a sense, of lobbying. Historically, Spivak notes, the general strike has consisted of demands to reform or rewrite laws; and in contemporary times, it should be no different. People should strike in order to pressure the state into changing those laws that currently render it accountable to corporations and the banks, rather than the people. The strike here bears no automatic relationship to class identity at all, and is used instead to make a normative argument, appealing to the legal system and the rule of law.

The general strike is a step outside the “normal” functioning of liberal democracies. Independent of its success, the growing legitimacy around an idea that has been, until a few months ago, all but unthinkable for the last six decades, is already a great achievement for the movement. Beyond the question of whether or not the general strike is a viable action, what emerges in these articles is a discussion around what a new class movement might look like, and what strategies need to be invoked in order to build such a movement in the long-term. Several issues are up for debate. The relationship between the movement and the existing unions, for instance—the nature of unions today, their politics, and whether their general cooperation with the capitalist system is reversible. Another is the legal framework that regulates labor struggle, our attitude toward it, and the right to protest in general: should we operate within this legal framework at the risk of being defeated from the start? Or should we find creative and intelligent ways to disrupt it? And finally, there is the question of class composition and whether class relations are even central today. Has class composition changed, and how might
The English Collective of Prostitutes was accompanied into the church by Women Against Rape and Black Women for Wages for Housework—both organizations share the Centre with us—since we were driven to seek sanctuary by a combination of issues: rape, racism, and the prostitution laws. We were uncertain of our safety and were glad to have two more pliable women’s groups with us.

We entered in twos and threes towards the end of the church service, when we knew the doors would be open. By the time the service was over there were about fifteen of us with sleeping bags and blankets sitting at the back. The priest came over to ask if something was wrong, and we told him we were staying overnight and why. We locked the doors of the church that night. The next morning we were up at 7 a.m. Nappies were changed and tea made. We put the church in perfect order, stowing the bedclothes neatly and discreetly in the back corner, opened the door for the 8 o’clock service and sat silently in the back pews.

When the service was over, we locked the door in the usual way, looked at each other and immediately and unanimously decided that we weren’t leaving. The Occupation of the church had well and truly begun.

By about 7 a.m. that morning the press had begun to arrive. We sent them away till after the church service was over. They came back about 9 a.m. and we carried out our plan: the two women at the door (invariably smokers since smoking was allowed only in that little vestibule) instructed pressmen to show their credentials at the centre; when a woman from the support unit returned with them, we opened the church door. Eventually the press of the world turned up, and we held press conferences every day. At one of these early press conferences the vicar was delighted to be included, and he spoke in support of us. Since he was supporting us, the media were relatively fair. His support didn’t last, however, and most of Fleet Street were delighted in a couple of days to get back to denigrating “vix girls” and trivializing our action.

Despite this, the press let people know it was happening, and they could make their own judgment. Once people knew, especially through television news, the visitors began to arrive.

Local residents dropped in, or stayed after service to talk to us. Some brought flowers, or tea, or toilet paper, and many put a donation in our collection box, which stood at the back with a display of our literature and a guest book.

There was a steady stream of individuals, mainly women, some students, some friends like Jackie Forster of Sappho, one of the oldest lesbian organizations in Britain, who came to help. (The ECP goes back a long way with Jackie and Sappho’s Tuesday evenings. Each time Jackie invited us to speak there, there were always one or two lesbian women who gave us a special welcome, making it clear they worked as prostitutes.)

People came out of a healthy curiosity (what is a church occupation?), to express support and to find out what they could do to help. Gay male friends later ran a crèche for us, and they and others cooked hot dinners. (Kentucky Fried as a steady diet is abrasive to port and to find out what they could do to help. Gay male friends later ran a crèche for us, and they and others cooked hot dinners. (Kentucky Fried as a steady diet is abrasive to port and to find out what they could do to help. Gay male friends later ran a crèche for us, and they and others cooked hot dinners. (Kentucky Fried as a steady diet is abrasive to port and to find out what they could do to help. Gay male friends later ran a crèche for us, and they and others cooked hot dinners. (Kentucky Fried as a steady diet is abrasive to port and to find out what they could do to help. Gay male friends later ran a crèche for us, and they and others cooked hot dinners.

A lot of women dropped in. Quite a few Black women came. One Black woman, in her request to Paul Boateng, the chairman of the Greater London Council Police Committee, to meet our demands, brought two large pots, one for meat eaters, one for vegetarians, which would be collected, with the cost, when empty, since our entire water supply came from a tiny wash basin in the loo.

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The answers are not simple ones. By our account the old labor movement is over in both the United States and in Europe. Which is not to say that class in the developed West is no longer central to the collective project of liberation and emancipation, but that contemporary forms of class radicalization, politicization, communication, and mobilization reveal a discontinuity with the past in the way people experience their own conditions. This is due, on the one hand, to structural changes in the organization of labor processes and to the international division of labor, and on the other hand, to the historical failures of the old workers’ movement. This does not mean that nothing is left from the past, or that we live in an entirely new world, but that the elements which have continuity with the past (certain forms of organization, certain forms of struggle...) are now combined into a fundamentally new constellation. Therefore, our task from here should be to learn from the past without being prisoners of it. Marx’s invitation, in the Eighteenth Brumaire, to realize the evangelical sentence “let the dead bury their dead,” retains all its validity today.

Moving forward from May Day, we need to cultivate discussion that is more political than ideological. We should, for example, rid the movement of the ideological notion of the “savior” or predestined revolutionary subject—yesterday the industrial working class, today the “precariat” or the dispossessed “proletariat.” We should discuss in concrete terms how class in its various contemporary articulations (employed, unemployed, and underemployed people, unionized workers, precarious workers, and undocumented workers, people of color, women, LBTIQ people) can again become a subject of struggle through self-organized social movements. This process is neither linear nor continuous and cannot be grasped through a prefabricated formula. Recognizing that as a movement we have asked good questions but that we have yet to provide good answers is a step in the right direction.

These meetings, which were a collective unveling of events, to figure out what was really going on, and the translation of overall strategy into immediate tactics, were daily culminations of the great learning experience we were creating. I’m tempted to say that no one ever learnt so much in a church until I remember that the church is traditionally the place women have been permitted, even encouraged, to visit; there they may have found the support and rejected them at home where they were always on call; there they could sort out their most intimate thoughts and problems, and could bring their search for an understanding of themselves and their world. We built on that tradition and transformed it by our collective contemplation.

Visitors, especially elected officials, also got a church education. They heard first-hand how the police were protecting pimps. When threatened with having their kneecaps broken if they didn’t hand over their money regularly, women would go to the police, describe the man, the car and the license plate, and the police would tell them: “Come back when your kneecaps are broken.” For a couple of days there was always a pimp in a doorway from which he could see both the centre door and the church door, watching all who came and went from both. The police could not have missed seeing these pimps since they were also watching the centre and the church. (We were reminded that the French women were thrown out of their churches in 1975 when police and pimps came in together to get them out.) No woman was allowed to leave the church alone, and we kept track of them when they left. Those inside who were prostitutes were used to being in danger without being able to call on the police for help. The rest of us continued to learn.

One of the visitors was Juliet from Molesworth Peace Camp, who stayed for a couple of hours, quietly absorbing the scene. Next afternoon she returned with her bedroll to spend a couple of days.

Other peace campaigners were to join us. One woman was on her way to Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp and we sent a message to say that we wanted the military budget to come to women so that no woman need ever be a prostitute; therefore campaigning hookers were also part of the peace movement.

The next day after, three women from Common Women’s Peace Camp came with their bedrolls.

There was for us a deep affirmation of our own action in their warm and unassuming support. They believed in putting their politics into practice; and they are convinced that there isn’t anything more worthwhile than doing that. They are not passing through the

**DOUG HENWOOD**

**FINANCING A NEWER WORLD**

Ever since Arianna Huffington, one of our leading exploiters of unpaid labor, hatched her Move Your Money scheme a couple of years ago, I’ve been very skeptical of the calls to take your money (if you have any) out of big, conventional banks and put it instead into small banks and credit unions. My argument basically is that while there may be good consumer reasons—lower fees, friendlier service—to bank small, you’re not really doing much to change the world that way. Many small banks and credit unions already have more money than they know what to do with, and end up lending a lot to the big banks or buying very conventional bonds.

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peace movement as a step to one’s real life work, as some women have passed through women’s groups on their way to careers and personal power. They’re in it till we win because this is the most worthwhile and personally rewarding way to spend your life. They felt a responsibility to others who were also openly challenging the State’s right to power. We felt in the most profound sense that we were not alone. This has sustained us through many dark days since.

We later learnt from Juliet that she had originally visited us because she had got a message from a Greenham friend to the effect that “whores and lesbians have taken over a church. Things are really moving!” As always with people who are themselves organizing, they grasped the significance of others’ actions. They focused on the outcomes among us; that these were organizing, and together, was clearly exciting and inspiring to them. In a few days prostitute women from other red light areas began to drop in, to see who we were (as opposed to who the media said we were) and what was happening. We soon issued a weekly newsletter, which we distributed in other neighborhoods, and by mail. In this way, the word was spread and the establishment version of events countered. We later heard that prostitutes all over Britain knew how to read the media. Typical was: “no social workers would be sleeping on the floor of a cold church for me. I knew it was the real thing!” To express solidarity, women still working on the street in King’s Cross wore ECP badges. One night, all the women in Argylo Square wore masks. The next day there were some great tales of women defiantly arrested with masks on.

Winning

We had won. Helen Buckingham, who has been the only prostitute woman in Britain who has come out in order to campaign, and who with her infant son had spent at least eight hours in the church every day, had bought scented furniture wax as we neared victory. By the time we left for our press conference that Monday evening, she had polished every pew, and we had swept the church back into the order in which we had found it. It was cleaner and shinier than when we had entered and it smelled like lilacs.

We were very sorry to leave. Many more people use our cramped women’s centre than use that spacious church, and we had put it to such good use. We look at “our church” longingly each time we pass her.

Our lives had literally stopped for twelve days: the milkman had not been paid, the post not collected and money not earned. We were physically exhausted and we craved a bath and a bed. Yet we were loathe to re-enter the flat atmosphere of daily life. We dreaded slipping away from the authentic and collective life inside the church, back into the harness and blinkers of daily routine. In masks we had glimpsed what could happen: we created change. Taking off the masks, our collective power was as hidden as the reality to which it had penetrated. Going back to work—housework, whoring, office work, school work—is never a victory. It was hard to remember we had won.

Unfortunately, the rise of the Occupy movement only stoked delusions about small-scale finance instead of encouraging critical thought about what a better financial system might look like. Here’s an attempt to get something going.

Before I talk about how we might make better banks, a few words about what finance does. The classical line is that the financial sector exists to mediate between savings and investment. As Keynes said, “the whole thing is never a victory. It was hard to remember we had won.

We have come out in order to campaign, and who with her infant son had spent at least eight hours in the church every day, had bought scented furniture wax as we neared victory. By the time we left for our press conference that Monday evening, she had polished every pew, and we had swept the church back into the order in which we had found it. It was cleaner and shinier than when we had entered and it smelled like lilacs.

We were very sorry to leave. Many more people use our cramped women’s centre than use that spacious church, and we had put it to such good use. We look at “our church” longingly each time we pass her.

Our lives had literally stopped for twelve days: the milkman had not been paid, the post not collected and money not earned. We were physically exhausted and we craved a bath and a bed. Yet we were loathe to re-enter the flat atmosphere of daily life. We dreaded slipping away from the authentic and collective life inside the church, back into the harness and blinkers of daily routine. In masks we had glimpsed what could happen: we created change. Taking off the masks, our collective power was as hidden as the reality to which it had penetrated. Going back to work—housework, whoring, office work, school work—is never a victory. It was hard to remember we had won.
the Narus database, all phone calls, emails and other communications are automatically routed to the NSA's recorders.

The NSA wasn’t the only intelligence-gathering agency to have its domestic surveillance powers expanded in the wake of September 11th. The USA PATRIOT Act, for instance, allows the FBI to spy on US citizens without demonstrating probable cause that the persons whose records it seeks are engaged in criminal activities. Under Section 215 of the Act, the now infamous National Security Letters—which formerly required that the information being sought pertain to a foreign power or agent of a foreign power—can compel the disclosure of sensitive information held by banks, credit companies, telephone carriers, and Internet Service Providers, among many others, about US citizens. Recipients of NSLs are typically gagged from disclosing the fact or nature of the request.

It’s no secret then, that the communications data of even the most ordinary citizens is quite possibly compromised, despite what some assumptions are about our protection against unreasonable search and seizure under the Fourth Amendment. It’s also no secret that, under the pretense of “national security,” activists have been the targets of unchecked surveillance. For instance, in 2006 the ACLU revealed that the Pentagon was secretly conducting surveillance of protest activities, ant_war organizations, and groups opposed to military recruitment policies—including Quakers and student organizations—and sharing the information with other government agencies through the Threat and Local Observation Database, or TALON, which was designed to track terrorist threats. To gather information, the Pentagon relied on sources from the Department of Homeland Security, local police departments, and the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Forces. Or take the case of Scott Crow, a self-described anarchist and veteran organizer of anti corporate demonstrations, who, as the New York Times reported last year, is one of dozens of political activists across the country—including animal rights activists in Virginia and liberal Roman Catholics in Nebraska—to have come under scrutiny from the FBI’s increased counterterrorism operation. The FBI had set up a video camera outside his house, monitored guests as they came and went, tracked his emails and phone conversations, and picked through his trash to identify his bank and mortgage companies, presumably to send them subpoenas.

When the Occupy protests started in mid September of last year, the frequency of monitoring communications increased significantly. Within a few weeks I was on multiple OWS-related listservs; I’d started following Twitter with unprecedented commitment; I spent more hours on Facebook than I care to acknowledge. I doubt I’m the only one. At the same time, there was a widespread sense of precaution—just because we were engaging in legal activities, covered by our First Amendment rights, no one, it seemed, should presume her exempt from the possibility of leaving a trail of digital data that was being tracked or surveilled, either passively or actively. Was there no way to safeguard our privacy?

In late April, I sat down with the independent security researcher, hacker, and privacy advocate Jacob Appelbaum to discuss the growing surveillance state, and how activists might undertake to protect their privacy and anonymity while taking advantage of our communication technologies. Appelbaum is one of the key members of the Tor project, which, through a worldwide volunteer network of servers, reroutes Internet traffic across a set of encrypted relays in order to conceal a user’s location and protect her from a common form of networking surveillance known as traffic analysis. Appelbaum also runs the Tor browser, a self described anarchical and free software. It’s free as (in freedom) and free of charge. Appelbaum is also the only known American member of the international not for profit Web事项.

Sarah Resnick: In 2010, the Austin-based activist Scott Crow received his FBI files through a Freedom of Information Act request. Many of the 440 heavily redacted pages bore the rubric “Domestic Terrorism.” Crow has never been convicted of anything more serious than trespassing. Of course the US government has a long history of political targeting and spying on its citizens. For example, hoping to prove that Martin Luther King Jr. was communist, the FBI kept the civil rights leader under constant surveillance. In the 1970s, Richard Nixon authorized extensive surveillance of antiwar groups by the CIA. What’s different about today’s landscape, if anything? And do activists have reason to feel especially concerned?

Jacob Appelbaum: It’s not only about activists. Activists have more reason to be concerned, but I think everybody has reason to be concerned. With the NSA’s warrantless wiretapping program, for instance, everyone is a suspect, and the dossiers are built automatically. When you attract attention, the authorities go back to your records and they annotate them and then they gather evidence—and then they do it secretly. That means retroactive policing is possible. So all those days you didn’t think you were doing something important—the data is there, ready for searching. And although the data records are made of truths, the story they tell you about is not necessarily true. For example, it may be true you were at X location at Y time, but that doesn’t mean you know about anything that may have happened there. But the police are going to look at the data and tell the narrative that they want to tell. And because they review the data in secret, they can seize a server or raid a house based on their analysis, and then act as if it was completely disconnected from the intelligence gathering. And intelligence gathering is happening at a rate it’s never happened before. I mean, twenty years ago it wasn’t this bad. Ten years ago it was starting to get this bad. But today we are living in the golden age of surveillance.

Resnick: The recent article in Wired describes where and how the NSA plans to store its share of collected data. But as the article explains, the other planned use for Utah facility is for crypanalysis, or code breaking, since much of the data handled by the center will be heavily encrypted. It also suggests that the Advanced Encryption Standard (AES), which is expected to remain durable for at least another decade, may be cracked by the NSA in a much shorter time, if they’ve built a secret computer that is considerably faster than any of the machines we know about. But more to the point—encryption safe?

Appelbaum: Some of it is as safe as we think it can be, and some of it is not safe at all. The number one rule of “signals intelligence” is to look for plain text, or signaling information—who is talking to whom. For instance, you and I have been emailing, and that information, that metadata, isn’t encrypted, even if the contents of our messages are. This “social graph” information is worth more than the content of our messages. So, if you use SSL-encryption to talk to the OWS server for example, great, they don’t know what you’re saying. Maybe. Let’s assume the crypto is perfect...
of you. They just have to own your phone, or steal your recorder on the way out. The key thing is that good operational security has to be integrated into all of our lives so that observation of what we’re doing is much harder. Of course it’s not perfect. They can still target us, for instance, by sending us an exploit in our email, or a link in a web browser that compromises each of our computers. But if they have to exploit us directly, that changes things a lot. For one, the NYPD is not going to be writing exploits. They might buy software to break into your computer, but if they make a mistake, we can catch them. But it’s impossible to catch them if they’re in a building somewhere reading our text messages as they flow by, as they go through the switching center, as they write them down. We want to raise the bar so much that they have to attack us directly, and then in theory the law protects us to some extent.

Resnick: So if I were arrested, and the evidence presented came from a targeted attack on my computer, and I knew about the attack, I would have some kind of legal recourse?

Appelbaum: Well, that’s an interesting question. What is the legal standard for breaking into someone’s computer because they were at a protest? Congratulations, take that to the Supreme Court, you might be able to make some really good law. I think the answer is that it’s a national newsworthy incident— nobody knows the cops break into people’s computers. The cops break into someone’s house, the Fourth Amendment is super clear about that—it can’t be done without a warrant.

Resnick: In January of last year, it was reported that your Twitter account records—along with the accounts of Julian Assange, Private Bradley Manning, Dutch hacker Rop Gonggrijp, and Icelandic lawmaker Brigitta Jonsdottir—were subpoenaed by the US government. What is perhaps most notable in this case is not that the accounts were subpoenaed, but that the orders, usually gagged and carried out in secret, became public knowledge. Twitter contested the secrecy order and won the right to notify you. Several months later, the Wall Street Journal revealed that Google and the Internet service provider Sonic.net, had received similar orders.

Appelbaum: Twitter notified me. But as for Google and Sonic.net, I read about it in the Wall Street Journal like everybody else. So now I can talk about it because it was in a public newspaper. Those are “2703 d administrative subpoenas,” and they asked for IP addresses, and the email addresses of the people I communicated with, among other things. The government asserts that it has the right to get that metadata, that “signaling” or relationship information, without a warrant. They get to gag the company, and the company can’t fight it, because it’s not their data, it’s my data, or it’s data about me, so they have no Constitutional standing. And the government asserts that I have no expectation of privacy because I willingly disclosed it to a third party. And in fact my Twitter data was given to the government—no one has really written about this. We’re still not sure about the means by which means I had to disclose the data to the government, and whether or not they can use it is pending appeal. Once they get the data, it’s not like it’s private or secret—and even if they can’t use it as evidence, they can still use it in their investigations.

Resnick: In January of this year, the Twitter account of writer and OWS demonstrator Malcolm Harris was subpoenaed by the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office. I think it’s safe to assume these incidents are not anomalies. In which case, is there a way to disclose data to the government, and whether or not they can use it is pending appeal. Once they get the data, it’s not like it’s private or secret—and even if they can’t use it as evidence, they can still use it in their investigations.

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Appelbaum: In the case of something like Twitter, you can use Tor on the Android phone—we have a version of Tor for Android called Orbot—and Twitter together and that’s essentially the best you’re going to do. And even that isn’t particularly great. Twitter keeps a list of IP addresses where you’ve logged in, but if you use Tor, it won’t know you are logging in from your phone. It’s powerful, but the main problem is that it’s kind of complicated to use. On your computer, you can use the Tor browser, and when you log into Twitter, you’re fine, no problem all—your IP address will trace back to Tor again. So now when the government asserts that you have no expectation of privacy, you can say all right, well I believe I have an expectation of privacy, which is why I use Tor. I signal that. And the private messaging capability of Twitter—don’t use it for sensitive stuff. Twitter keeps a copy of all its messages.

Resnick: During the perceived wave of Internet activism during the 2009 Iranian election protests, there was a great deal of media hype surrounding Haystack, a proprietary software that promised Iranian activists tightly encrypted messages, access to censored websites, and the ability to obfuscate Internet traffic. You later tested the software and demonstrated its claims to be false. For those of us who don’t have your technical skill set, how can we assess whether a particular tool is safe to use, especially if it’s new?

Appelbaum: First, is the source code available? Second, if the claims are just too good to be true, they probably are. There’s a thing called snake oil crypto or snake oil software, where the product promises the moon and the sun. When a developer promises that a proprietary software is super secure and only used by important super secret it’s sketchy. Third, are the people working on this part of the community that has a reputation for accomplishing these things? That’s a hard one, but ask someone you know and trust. How would you go on a date with someone? How would you do an action with someone? Transitive trust is just as important in these situations.

Another thing to look at is whether it’s centralized or decentralized. For example Haystack was centralized, whereas Tor is decentralized. Also, how is it sustained? Will it inject ads into your web browser, like AnchorFree, the producer of the Hotspot Shield VPN? Or is it like Rispup.net, whose VPN service monetizes not through your traffic, but through donations and solidarity and mutual aid? And if they can inject ads, that means they can inject a back door. That’s super sketchy—if they do that, that’s bad news. So you want to be careful about that.

Finally, remember: The truth is like a bullet that pierces through the armor of charlatans.

Resnick: What should we know about cell phones? It’s hard to imagine going into a protest without one. But like all networked technologies, surely they are double-edged?

Appelbaum: Cell phones are tracking devices that make phone calls. It’s sad, but it’s true. Which means software solutions don’t always matter. You can have a secure set of tools on your phone, but it doesn’t change the fact that your phone tracks everywhere you go. And the police can potentially push updates onto your phone that backdoor it and allow it to be turned into a microphone remotely, and do other stuff like that. The police can identify everybody at a protest by bringing in a device called an IMSI catcher. It’s a fake cellphone tower that can be built for 1500 bucks. And once nearby, everybody’s cell phones will automatically jump onto the tower, and if the phone’s unique identifier is exposed, all the police have to do is go to the phone company and ask for their information.

Resnick: So phones are tracking devices. And taking the battery out would disable any surreptitious recording?

Appelbaum: Maybe. But iPhones, for instance, don’t have a removable battery; it powers off via the power button. But if I wrote a backdoor for the iPhone, it would play an animation that looked just like a black screen. And then when you pressed the button to turn it back on it would pretend to boot. Just play two videos.

Resnick: And how easy is it to create something like that?

Appelbaum: There are weaponized toolkits sold by companies like FinFisher that enable breaking into BlackBerries, Android phones, iPhones, Symbian devices and other platforms. And with a single click, say, the police can own a person, and take over her phone.

Resnick: Right—the Wall Street Journal first reported on this new global market for off-the-shelf surveillance technology in November of last year, and created a “Surveillance Catalog” on their website, which includes documents obtained from attendees of a secretive surveillance conference held near Washington, D.C. And WikiLeaks has also released documents on these companies. The industry has grown from almost nothing to a retail market worth $5 billion per year. And whereas companies making and selling this gear say it is intended to catch criminals, and is available only to governments and law enforcement, critics say the market represents a new sort of arms trade supplying Western governments and repressive nations alike.

Appelbaum: It’s scary because (accessing these products is so) easy. But when a company builds a backdoor, and sells it, and says trust us, only good guys will use it . . . well, first of all, we don’t know how to secure computers, and anybody that says otherwise is full of shit. If Google can get owned, and Boeing can get owned, and Lockheed Martin can get owned, and engineering and communication documents from Marine One can show up on a filesharing network, it is realistic to assume that perfect security is possible? Knowing this is the case, the right thing is to not build any backdoors. Or assume these backdoors are all abused and bypass them so that the data acquired is very uninteresting. Like encrypted phone calls between two people—it’s true they can wiretap the data, but they’ll just get noise.

But for instance, when Hillary Clinton and the State Department say they want to help people abroad fight repressive governments, they paint Internet freedom as something they can enable with $25 million.
They said we could have an antifascist meeting, but not a march. The human rights activist Lev Ponomarev and I went to City Hall to find out what was up. The respected activist was very angry. I tried to restrained him.

“My God, why are you telling them to hold all the marches? That’s what you were thinking.”

“I’ll teach them to let the fascists march,” he growled.

You get a feeling this wasn’t going to end well.

The deputy head of the department for large demonstrations, Vasily Oleynik, turned out to be a fat rossetine little man.

“You see?” he began, smiling, “the decision on this matter has already been taken!”

“Do you know Russian?” Ponomarev asked grimly. “But we’re speaking Russian right now,” said Oleynik.

“No. If that’s how you begin a conversation, then you don’t know Russian,” said Ponomarev.

That’s how it began, with a little light antagonism, but then it seemed to improve. There were smiles, and diplomacy.

“But of course you understand, Lev Alexandrovich.”

“Yes of course, Vasily Vasilovich.”

“We already told everyone about the march,” I said grimly.

“There’s no going back.” Oleynik began citing legalities.

“We already told everyone about the march, “ I said grimly.

“We already told everyone about the march,” Oleynik began citing legalities.

Pono gave as good as he got in that department, and my attention wandered a little. Once they start in with the clauses and subclauses and anti-clauses, everything turns into a joke, a scam, like in court (and I don’t like these kinds of scams).

Outside, I could see the river.

An immense working-class suffering, a crisis (“$50,000,” “$60,000”…) for a foreclosed home once belonging to a cash-stricken family? What kind of person ignores the brave chorus of people who have frozen our blood, who have frozen our blood, who have frozen our blood? We’ve just tried to impede the profit-making of somebody’s home, because the right to a home should be enshrined in law and eviction forbidden, not least of all in a climate of record bank bonuses, intense working-class suffering, and stunning homelessness. But noticeably, those whom Organize for Occupation is hindering, in the most direct, theatrical sense, are not Brian Moynihan and Vikram Pandit. They are, instead, long-suffering small-time real estate investors, Italian, Chassidic, Russian, and African American: ninety-nine-per-centers, Quasi-sectarians, children, ignorant of your rights. Little marginals.

Old maids from the library.

Are you a subculture or a political party—make up your minds—what are you?”

Oleynik’s boss, Kadatsky, didn’t come to the aid of his deputy. He was at a meeting.

He’d sent Oleynik to meet with us but didn’t come to help him, just stayed at the meeting. Coward.

A sense of one’s rights gives a person physical force, I thought, watching as Pono smashed up Oleynik. Whereas we, on the left, never really feel our rights, just the ephemeral right to some far-off utopia. All those years of discussing the victims of the Revolution have frozen our blood, have turned us into frightened ducklings, unable to defend our own rights, much less someone else’s, thought I, already out into the street, out of that hell, riding the subway home late in the evening.

And I’d have kept thinking this way, for quite a while, except then I got an email from Ponomarev:

“...They still hadn’t allowed the march. Tomorrow we head again for City Hall.”

Kirill Medvedev, translated by Keith Gessen

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The creditor in this racket—i.e. the publicly bailout-bailed-out—dispossesses someone’s current home, but doesn’t want a house, nor to evict anybody itself. A bank can’t do much with a house, after all: it certainly can’t cook and sleep and shower and eat in it. Thank goodness then, that homes themselves are basic currency. The bank then profits from the re-conveyance of the “fee simple,” that is, the sale of various rights and remnant pertaining to the deeds or the mortgage. And the sale usually goes to individual middle-class petty real estate traders physically present in court, and ostensibly only to make good what it originally, poor righteous bank, was owed.

So, no, you don’t see rich, besuited persons sitting in the front pew, snapping up those “clouded titles” and the various “rights of redemption” representing an eviction’s unsettled taxes or unpaid bills. Inside the weekly foreclosure auction, one theater of the King’s Appelbaum: The people who say that—that if they’re not cops, they’re feeling unempowered. The first response people have is, whatever, I’m not important. And the second is, they’re not watching me, and even if they were, there’s nothing they could find because I’m not doing anything illegal. But the thing is, taking precautions with your communications is like safe sex in that you have a responsibility to other people to be safe—your transgressions can fuck other people over. The reality is that when you find out it will be too late. It’s not about doing a perfect job, it’s about recognizing you have a responsibility to do that job at all, and doing the best job you can manage, without it breaking down your ability to communicate, without it ruining your day, and understanding that sometimes it’s not safe to undertake an action, even if other times you would. That’s the education component.

County magistrate’s court on Adams street, in downtown Brooklyn, the public sits to witness the transfer of property rights from one person to another. The type of transfer is a little complicated, divesting people, usually absent, of the collateral used for the mortgage they took out long before the economy crashed.

“We’re going to survive, but we don’t know how, listen, auctioneer.” The King’s Court police officers remove loudly singing protesters in handcuffs, while the traders attempt to get their business done in an improvised sign language. (I urge you to look up what you can of these scenes on YouTube). Leaving court, those civil disobedients are thinking something like this: We’ve just tried to impede the profit-motivated divestment of somebody’s home, because the right to a home should be enshrined in law and eviction forbidden, not least of all in a climate of record bank bonuses, intense working-class suffering, and stunning homelessness. But noticeably, those whom Organize for Occupation is hindering, in the most direct, theatrical sense, are not Brian Moynihan and Vikram Pandit. They are, instead, long-suffering small-time real estate investors, Italian, Chassidic, Russian, and African American: ninety-nine-per-centers, every one.

Should this be a problem for us, activists ponder as they leave the court? Even as a stand-in for class analysis, the “99%” is in practice perplexing, a naive distributionalist mental sketch containing a superficial, populist have/have-not dispensation. Ultimately, is there no real diversion of impact “because capitalists are capitalists” (Mom and Pop flavored or otherwise)? And, as the extraction of surplus is orchestrated by much fatter cats, most one grin over any “collateral damage” to the smaller reactionary wheeler-dealers? OaO’s “Moratorium Now” campaign is nothing politically out

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Sophie Lewis

Organizing for Occupation

What kind of person, confronted with an outburst of song, stands at the front of a public court-room, and hurriedly nods and gesticulates their way through a bidding process (“$50,000,” “$60,000”) for a foreclosed home once belonging to a cash-stricken family? What kind of person ignores the brave chorus “Listen, Auctioneer!!! All the people here are telling you to hold all the sales right now” to compete crazily with other speculators, for a currently-inhabited four-bedroom? Well, it’s a very ordinary kind of person. It isn’t “the 1%,” in case that’s what you were thinking.
Part of informed consent is understanding the risks you are taking as you decide whether to partake in something. That’s what makes us free—the freedom to question what we’re willing to do. And of course it’s fine to do that. But it’s not fine to say, I don’t believe there’s a risk, you’re being paranoid, I’m not a target. When people say that they don’t want to engage in surveillance, we need to take them seriously. And just because the surveillance is expanding, and continues to expand, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t push back. If you haven’t committed a crime they should have no reason to get that information about you, especially without a warrant.

Resnick: Are there any other tools or advice you would suggest to prevent the government of the ordinary, almost any campaign appears to involve battles against foot-soldiers and functionaries of accumulation, rather than CEOs and Congressmen. Fighting the man is currently a scatter-ative, pragmatic, skilful, universal, and particular. Like UK Uncut in Great Britain, which sought to expose corporate tax evasion within the new climate of budget cuts, welfare slashing, and austerity. Organize for Occupation finds itself in a position where it is defending private property and incomanners petty entrepreneurs (or, in UK Uncut’s case, playing tax collector to the individual business and incomanners ordinary shoppers). It is probably right that a certain inustness should attend our political explanations of this mess, two-pronged struggle for transitional public welfare, on one hand, and for the ultimate destruction of the paramilitary that makes welfare necessary, on the other. Like with almost any revolutionary group—the puertorriqueñ Young Lords (a revolutionary movement for socialism and Puerto Rican independence), for instance—the movement is at the point of accumulation by dispossession: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing.

When capitalism is working, it hurts people; but when it has crashed, it hurts people even more. Groups figure out how to act on this paradox. Invisibility in time. Occupy Wall Street is a network like any other, beguiling some previously existing campaigns to merge with it, opening its spokes-council structure to them, and yet also keeping others separate. There are many who want to focus on tenants’ and neighbors’ struggles. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing. O4O, with its own collections, or TB testing.

Holloway said, ‘We are proud to be first on earth. No percentages, in any way, anywhere; first, pure, naked, measurable concepts. Work would disappear, as the measure of value. Commodity would fall away as statistically measurable concepts. Work would carry no wage, commodities would become things, and families could form at will. One would witness a giant exodus of quantity as it disappeared back into liberated quality. And the apotheosis of the historic part would do away with the need for politics in its totality; we would merely administer our commons, share according to ability and according to need, and the last would (all) be first on earth. No percentages, in the classless society. OK. Perhaps I am not really such a wild-eyed millenarian. The point is that we have too long suffered in the grip of the neoliberal anti-politics machine. My desire is first and foremost a desire for the return of politics, as we have seen these past few months; and if there must be politics in perpetuity, as we figure out and figure out all over again how to live together on the earth, so be it.

I would encourage people to think about the activity they want to engage in, and then say, Hey, this is what I want to do. Work together collaboratively to figure out how to do that safely and securely, but also easily without needing to give someone a technical education. Because that’s a path of madness. And if people aren’t willing to change their behaviors a little bit, you just can’t work with them. I mean that’s really what it boils down to. If people pretend that they’re not being oppressed by the state when they are literally being physically beaten and forced to give up retinal scans, that’s fucking ridiculous. We have to take drastic measures for some of these things.

The FBI has this big fear that they’re going to “go dark,” which means that all the ways they currently obtain information will disappear. Well, America started with law enforcement in the darker times of the 19th century until people started going to jail. And just because the surveillance is expanding, and continues to expand, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t push back. If you haven’t committed a crime they should have no reason to get that information about you, especially without a warrant.

Of the ordinary, almost any campaign appears to involve battles against foot-soldiers and functionaries of accumulation, rather than CEOs and Congressmen. Fighting the man is currently a scatter-ative, pragmatic, skilful, universal, and particular. Like UK Uncut in Great Britain, which sought to expose corporate tax evasion within the new climate of budget cuts, welfare slashing, and austerity. Organize for Occupation finds itself in a position where it is defending private property and incomanners petty entrepreneurs (or, in UK Uncut’s case, playing tax collector to the individual business and incomanners ordinary shoppers). It is probably right that a certain inustness should attend our political explanations of this mess, two-pronged struggle for transitional public welfare, on one hand, and for the ultimate destruction of the paramilitary that makes welfare necessary, on the other. Like with almost any revolutionary group—the puertorriqueñ Young Lords (a revolutionary movement for socialism and Puerto Rican independence), for instance—the movement is at the point of accumulation by dispossession: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing.

When capitalism is working, it hurts people; but when it has crashed, it hurts people even more. Groups figure out how to act on this paradox. Invisibility in time. Occupy Wall Street is a network like any other, beguiling some previously existing campaigns to merge with it, opening its spokes-council structure to them, and yet also keeping others separate. There are many who want to focus on tenants’ and neighbors’ struggles. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing. O4O, with its own mission: at the place of public robbery, eviction, hunger, or pollution; at the place where people are going (this in 1969) without breakfast, garbage collections, or TB testing.

Instead, maybe don’t turn it off, just leave it at home. Because, as I said earlier, in a world with lots of data retention, our data trails tell a story about us, and even if the story is made of truthful facts, it’s not necessarily the truth. On a cellphone, you can create a secure communication channel on top of an insecure one. On a Mac, use Adium—it comes with OTR, but you still have to turn it on. When you chat with people, click verify and read the fingerprint to each other over the telephone. You want to do this because there could be a “man in the middle” relaying the messages, which means that you are both talking to a third party, and that third party is recording it all.

For email, using Riseup.net is good news. The solutions they offer are integrated with Tor as much as possible. They’re badasses. I’m pretty sure that, because of the way they run the system, the only data they have is encrypted. And I’d like to think that, what little unencrypted data they do have, they will fight tooth and nail to protect. Whereas, yes, you can use Tor and Gmail together, but it’s not as integrated—when you sign in, Gmail doesn’t ask if you want to route this over Tor. But also, Google inspects your traffic as a method of monetization. I’d rather give Riseup fifty dollars a month for the equivalent service of Gmail knowing their commitment to privacy. And also knowing that they would tell the cops to go fuck themselves. There’s a lot of value in that.

For chatting, use software with off-the-record messaging (OTR)—not Google’s “go off the record,” but the actual encryption software—which allows you to have an end-to-end encrypted conversation. And configure it to work with Tor. You can bootstrap a secure communication channel on top of an insecure one. On a Mac, use Adium—it comes with OTR, but you still have to turn it on. When you chat with people, click verify and read the fingerprint to each other over the telephone. You want to do this because there could be a “man in the middle” relaying the messages, which means that you are both talking to a third party, and that third party is recording it all.

As for your cellphone, consider it a tracking device and a monitoring device and treat it appropriately. Be very careful about using cellphones, but consider especially the patterns you make. If you pull the battery, you’ve generated an anomaly in your behavior, and perhaps that’s when they trigger people to go physically surveil you. Instead, maybe don’t turn it off, just leave it at home. Because, as I said earlier, in a world with lots of data retention, our data trails tell a story about us, and even if the story is made of truthful facts, it’s not necessarily the truth. On a cellphone, you can install stuff like OStel, which allows you to make encrypted voice-over-the-Internet calls on the phone. If you’re feeling multilingual, host stuff in another country. Open an email account in Sweden, and use TAILS to access it. Most important is to know your options. A notepad next to a fireplace is a lot more secure than a computer in some ways, especially a computer with no encryption. You can always throw the notepad in the fireplace and that’s that.
Hi guys,

I don’t know whether I’m fact-checking or writing a rebuttal here. But there are some errors in your piece about the New School occupation from 2008 [Rachel Signer, Gazette #3].

There was no third night of the New School occupation. It lasted about thirty hours, starting on the evening of the seventeenth and ending in the early morning of the eighteenth, which, unless you apply some pretty Jesuitical reasoning, still counts as only the second night. I know it’s a small point, undoubtedly just a typo, but I’m bothered by it because there’s already some querulous reasoning, still counts as only the second night. I know it’s a small point, probably just a typo, but I’m bothered by it because there’s already some querulous reflex around the New School to look at those thirty-odd hours and overestimate the possible and underestimate the success.

As a final thought, I’d say just to remember that a big part of this is social behavior and not technology per se. And a big part of it is accepting that while we may live in a dystopian society right now, we don’t always have to. That’s the tradeoff, right? Because what is OWS working toward? The answer is, something different. And if we want an end to social inequality, the surveillance state is part of what we have to change. If we care in the slightest about the people, we will have done this. So, it needs to be the case that what we do doesn’t hang us for what we wish to create.

I just wrote a letter about my alma mater. Gross.

James Pogue

James Pogue is a graduate of Eugene Lang College, The New School, class of 2010.

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Hi guys,

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