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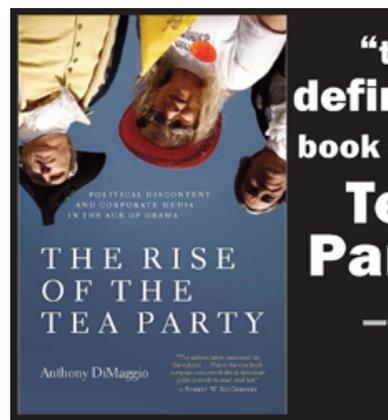
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NATIONAL Dreaming Big OWS Organizers Plan Spring Offensive



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BY **NATHAN SCHNEIDER**
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It's bizarre how often nowadays one hears Occupy Wall Street talked about in the past tense — bizarre, especially, if one was at the strategy meeting of OWS's Direct Action group on Jan. 8. Around 150 of the movement's most restless radicals sat on the hardwood floor and in folding chairs at 16 Beaver Street, a block from the Charging Bull in downtown Manhattan. The purpose was a big-picture strategic discussion about where the movement's tactics had taken it so far and where to go in the coming months. As if to match the scale of the conversation, huge sheets of paper were spread across the center of the room, which scribes marked up with the gist of what was being said.

There was no lack of confidence to go around — just the kind of infectious naïveté that drove some of these same people to take and hold Zuccotti Park back in September. They reviewed their favorite things about what they'd done since then: moments that captured the world's attention and, especially, the ones in which they shed their own fear and had enough fun to want to continue. For better or worse, a lot of this is still fixated on defying the NYPD, rather than really challenging the economic order or movement building. A lot of them spoke highly of the barricade-removing hijinks of New Year's Eve, which was fun if you were there but didn't play very well in Peoria.

"We're somewhere between a movement and a revolution," concluded Austin Guest, a 31-year-old with sideburns on only one side of his thick, brown beard. He added that, if they wanted to, they could bring down Bank of America in six months. Whenever there was a break, someone would jump up on a chair and start telling radical jokes. Why do anarchists only drink coffee? How many feminists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Somebody else would already know the punch line and shout it out, while others burst into laughter until they could hardly breathe. This was not the mood one would expect to find in a bygone movement.

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Nor would one expect the litany of upcoming actions reeled off by a woman named Tammy, who, as part of the Interoccupy project, was helping to coordinate occupations nationwide. There would be “Occupy the Dream” protests on MLK Day. On Jan. 20, Move to Amend would be organizing actions throughout the country against corporate personhood. There was Occupy Education on March 1, a global day of action on May 12 and actions against the G8 and NATO summits in Chicago later that month. Other people added more: an Egypt solidarity march on Jan. 21, a day recognizing violence against women on Feb. 14 and a mobilization in D.C. marking the anniversary of Dr. King’s assassination on April 4.

In the minds of many, the crown jewel was the global general strike that Occupy Los Angeles called for May Day— though pulling anything close to that, given the state of organized labor in the United States, would seem next to impossible. “I’m totally in love with the general strike,” said one middle-aged man, describing himself as an artist who for years has lived below the poverty line. “To me it’s analogous to seeing the face of God.” He also suggested bringing 10,000 people to Battery Park to watch the sun set on the summer solstice, led by Native American shamans.

After the open brainstorming, the facilitator, a tall man with a blond rattail, tried to guide the meeting toward specific “throughline projects.” These, he explained, are big ones that the whole group can put its energy behind, that would string the isolated days of action into an overarching story, disrupt the pillars of support for corporate power and liberate more space that a new kind of world could fill. Breakout groups discussed what these projects might be.

One group centered its discussion around mounting occupations of foreclosed homes and defunded schools. The group that attracted the most people was devoted to shutdowns: banks, ports, malls, you name it. A New Jerseyan named Chris, who started the famous We Are the 99 Percent blog, called for balancing these disruptive actions with making the movement “a healing force.” Lots of fingers wiggling high in the air — this went without saying. People had already been talking about setting up childcare centers, schools, kitchens, free clinics and worker-owned co-ops, especially in the public spaces they’re hoping to re-occupy in the spring.

From start to finish, there was almost no talk of the presidential elections — what virtually everyone else in this country thinks of when they think of politics for the year ahead. The closest those at the meeting came was one quick mention of protests at both parties’ conventions and a call for voter noncooperation.

By omission, it seems, this movement intends to create a countervailing narrative to the election-year joust among the powers that be, to get people thinking about a whole different kind of politics. It’s no small task to compete with an election that will spend more money spent in it than ever before imaginable; the movement will need to offer people something more hopeful, more compelling and more tangible than any presidential candidate can promise to deliver.

In order to do so, some believe that the movement needs a national coming-together, an Occupied convention to hammer out points of unity. A group working to develop what it calls the “99% Declaration” — controversial for its embrace of legislative demands and representative politics — has called for a “National General Assembly” in Philadelphia on July 4, with delegates elected through its website. The General Assembly at Occupy Philadelphia has countered by passing its own “National Gathering Process Proposal,” which insists that it would only host such a convention if it were planned and peopled by the other Occupy GAs.

One of that proposal's drafters, Nathan Kleinman, explained to me at the Jan. 8 meeting, "This is not about the gathering itself, this is about how to organize one." As always in the movement, process takes precedence. Kleinman is also one of the creators of Interoccupy, where conference calls are now being used on a daily basis by Occupy activists around the country to work together on a variety of projects.

Another national convergence is also in the works, with the same organizers as the occupation at Freedom Plaza in Washington, D.C. (Though it has now joined the Occupy fold, Freedom Plaza was actually being planned months before Occupy Wall Street was first called for in July.) Dubbed "NOW DC" — the National Occupation of Washington, D.C. — it's supposed to begin on Mar. 30 and run for as long as one month. Several of those behind it met in New York on Jan. 7 (at the office of this newspaper) to start setting NOW DC in motion. They also came to 16 Beaver the next day. While Occupy Wall Street was still deciding what to do for the next few months, this group was well into discussing how to do it.

"The Occupy movement isn't really into planning the way we are," said Kevin Zeese, a onetime Ralph Nader campaign manager, during the NOW DC discussions. And he's right. Even while meeting to plan and strategize, those at 16 Beaver weren't ready to do away with the improvisational, reactive free-for-all that had brought Occupy Wall Street to the world's attention in the first place. An organizer with a red, white and blue bandana over his long, curly hair pointed out that their most carefully planned marches had tended to stay on the sidewalks, where police wanted them. "We took the road only when we didn't plan ahead," he said. "Let's just remember that."

Nathan Schneider is an editor at WagingNonviolence.org, where an earlier version of this article was published.

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