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Occupy, After Occupy

Nathan Schneider | September 5, 2012



A New York City Police officer near the New York Stock Exchange Wednesday, July 11, 2012, in New York. (AP Photo/Frank Franklin II)

At the corner of Spring and Varick streets, in the ethereal white halls of a Manhattan Mini Storage, two members of the Occupy Wall Street Archives Working Group have assembled competing visions of how the movement should be remembered. Their collections look deceptively similar: cramped, high-ceilinged storage closets packed with cardboard signs, boxes, banners, and stray objects such as a mannequin, a pig mask, a miniature tent, an orange mesh police net and hundreds of unopened letters. Neither self-appointed archivist has had access to the other's stash. They rarely even speak to each other, having undergone a philosophical falling-out—one that, as the first birthday of OWS approaches, seems to hinge on the question of whether the movement should be spoken of in the past or present tense.

Amy Roberts is in her mid-30s and works for a public library in New York while studying for her certification as an archivist. She's typically soft-spoken and considerate, qualities I appreciated when we were watching out for each other in the streets after the early morning police raid that evicted the Occupiers from Zuccotti Park last November. She hopes to deliver the contents of her storage unit to New York University's Tamiment Library, which specializes in labor and the left, and which for months has been courting the Archives Working Group. The materials would be professionally cataloged and preserved there, allowing easy access for whatever future historians might want to see them.

As we went through the objects in her storage unit, we played some memory games, trying to pin the objects to their particular time and place. "It's nice to go through this again," Roberts said, holding a letter that accompanied a donation of clothes from a fashionable retailer in Los Angeles.

On another floor of the same building, Jeremy Bold keeps his branch of the OWS Archives. Bold, who goes by variants of "Jez" in the movement, is in his late 20s and has a wispy beard that's most profuse in the region between his jaw line and neck. He has been working as a philosophy librarian at NYU but now is entering a more transient period. "There is no such thing as permanence in my life," he observed in characteristically metaphysical terms.

Like Roberts, Bold collected signs, documents and other ephemera throughout the occupation and its aftermath. Since he was part of the earliest planning meetings in New York, some of his objects have particular historical significance. But now, unable to keep paying for the storage unit, he wants to give them away. "I guess my part is over," he said. "If people still feel strongly about this stuff, I think they'll want to take care of it."

To this end, he's been developing what he calls the "Anarchives"—a system for preserving the movement's material history outside of institutions like NYU. Rather than keeping all of the objects in one place, they'd be divided among those who helped create them, who would then catalog and interpret their holdings in an online database.

"The history is left to be preserved by the people still living it," Bold explained. Rather than the fossilized existence offered by Tamiment, the Anarchives would play an ongoing role in an ongoing movement, in a manner consistent with the movement's do-it-yourself ideals. Bold's proposal, however, assumes that Occupy Wall Street is still alive and well.

During the fall of 2011, op-ed pages and cable news shows constantly referred to "the Occupy protests" and tried their darnedest to explain what exactly had caused this sudden and unhygienic uprising. The encampments last fall indisputably "changed the conversation," specifically by enabling the country to talk about wealth and inequality again. In many cases, Occupy even provoked an analysis of corporate domination over politics and everyday life. But after the dismantling of the Zuccotti Park encampment in November 2011, the media lost interest, lending the impression that the movement no longer exists.

But those, like Bold, who are part of that rarefied clique of Occupiers still pressing on have reasons to think otherwise. "Sleepful protest" encampments continue on the sidewalk in front of Trinity Church at the top of Wall Street and at other sites around the country. There are still more meetings going on than one can count, many of which are laying the plans for the one-year anniversary actions on September 17. Some are even being held under the Hare Krishna Tree in Tompkins Square Park, where planning meetings took place for the original occupation, and with about the same number of people. A year later, the déjà vu is palpable, complete with much the same precariousness, naïveté and uncertainty. Something is happening, but you don't know what it is.

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After big expectations for a “99 Percent Spring,” the Occupy movement has had a trying summer. The wave of evictions that ended most of the country’s 24/7 occupations in late fall was only the beginning of the crackdown. Meetings and actions over the winter seemed especially rife with infiltrators, and such suspicions were confirmed in May, when undercover officers lured activists in Cleveland and Chicago into terrorism charges that could put them in prison for decades. Mark Adams, a much admired member of the OWS Direct Action Working Group, served about a month on Rikers Island for his role in an attempted reoccupation of an unused park owned by Trinity Church on December 17. Whenever Occupiers have gathered in public spaces in New York, police have seemed especially willing to use force to ensure that no new occupation can establish itself—even if that isn’t actually anyone’s intent. “Across the United States, abusive and unlawful protest regulation and policing practices have been and continue to be alarmingly evident,” concluded a report produced by the Protest and Assembly Rights Project, a coalition formed by several law school clinics.

In July, New York Police Department officials claimed to have found DNA evidence that resulted in a sensational *New York Post* headline: OWS Murder Link. The alleged “link” to an eight-year-old crime turned out to be the result of sloppy lab work, but the damage was already done. At a peaceful action in Zuccotti Park the day the story ran, passers-by clutching the paper confronted Occupiers, and demanded, “Where’s the murderer?”

Thus, the backlash has come not only from the law and its enforcers but from the media as well. The late reactionary pundit Andrew Breitbart, with the help of FBI infiltrator Brandon Darby, will soon strike from the grave with *Occupy Unmasked*, a documentary hit piece against the movement. Such counterattacks would be less troubling were the crude stereotypes they perpetuate about populist resistance not finding their way into some of the most hallowed icons of pop culture. In this summer’s *The Dark Knight Rises*, the villainous Bane takes all of Gotham City hostage, resulting in an anarchic spree as the city is handed over to “the people.” A climactic sequence, partly filmed on Wall Street while OWS was still in Zuccotti Park a few blocks away, depicts a battle for the Financial District in which a column of gallant police officers—backed by the crime-fighting vigilante Batman (the alter ego of billionaire arms dealer Bruce Wayne)—charges against a vicious mob of 99 percenters armed with AK-47s to save the day. It is difficult to imagine a more telling self-depiction of American corporate fascism, or a more callous attempt to discredit its enemies through the caricature of superhero movies.

Such physical and psychological attacks have taken their toll. Younger Occupiers, with mounting rap sheets and untended fatigue, have slowly been learning the art of “self-care”—taking breaks, traveling, finding a balance. Meanwhile, many older supporters, as well as those with family responsibilities, have been successfully spooked away by the same grisly police violence that helped draw their sympathy in the first place.

Many of the movement’s internal features, which once lent an aura of inclusivity—the lack of demands, the improvisational structure, the shunning of paid organizers—have become less and less fruitful. In a society still ruled by capitalism and hierarchy, anarchist utopia isn’t easy to keep up for long. Working groups have splintered into project groups and affinity groups that have gone on strike against one another. Even if these groups could agree about anything, there are no adequate venues for making collective decisions. Occupiers have tended to respond to repression with reaction rather than strategic counteroffensives, which makes that repression all the more effective. Once the beacon of great hope, Occupy is in danger of becoming a catastrophic disappointment, convincing another generation of the futility of resistance and the need to retreat into ironic distance. Then again, some would argue, maybe having “changed the conversation” was victory enough.

Ravi Ahmad isn’t one of them. A 34-year-old Occupier with a day job as an administrator at Columbia University, Ahmad’s specialty in OWS is keeping track of the disparate project groups and helping them

connect through social media, a weekly e-mail blast and the *Project List*, an occasional print publication helping new people to plug in. “We’ve moved out of the spectacular phase,” she said. “The main focus of what we do now is day-in, day-out organizing.” For her, that part’s even more important. And so is a sense of perspective: “The [goal] of Occupy is to smash capitalism,” she reminded me. “That’s the standard we measure ourselves by.”

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The movement’s real accomplishment, however, has been even more significant than just “changing the conversation.” Because news reporters don’t make a habit of paying attention to grassroots activists the way they follow presidential exercise habits or wobbly stock tickers, they’re not attuned to the sea change brought about by Occupy. But people organizing for economic justice—especially young people—now know one another. They’ve practiced direct democracy in general assemblies and risked their bodies in direct action. They’re talking with each other over networks that they created themselves, as well as traveling together and building their capacity for future action.

“Occupy unleashed this heightened sense of resistance,” says Chris Longenecker, one of Occupy Wall Street’s busiest organizers before taking a break to drive a pedicab in Boston. “We’ve formed really close bonds.” Now those comrades are spread around the country, organizing locally but staying in touch.

Distance and time—as well as involvement in ongoing local struggles—have lessened many people’s attachment to the Occupy label. “I’ve been working with all the same people I worked with in Occupy,” said Kate Savage, who specialized in facilitating assemblies at Occupy Nashville, “only it’s not called ‘Occupy’ for a variety of reasons.” For many issues and on many fronts, onetime Occupiers are finding that the Occupy brand—and all the associations that come with it—can sometimes hurt more than it helps.

Thus, the internally splintering movement shows signs of morphing into a productively subdivided movement of movements. One example of this has been this summer’s escalating wave of direct actions against the worst culprits of the environmental crisis. For the first time, a fracking well was blockaded and shut down in Pennsylvania, and a mountaintop-removal coal mine in West Virginia, at the request of local residents, received similar treatment. The Keystone XL oil pipeline, which inspired protests at the White House last year, now has locals and out-of-towners putting their bodies in the way of construction in Texas. In New York State, the fight is against the Spectra pipeline, which would funnel explosive fracked natural gas into parts of Manhattan.

At each of these protests, Occupy veterans have brought their bravado, their experience and their networks with them. “Lots of folks are going from eco-action to eco-action,” said Longenecker. “They’re building their skill sets.”

The environmental campaigns are only one such beneficiary of the movement. Some Occupiers are serving as hired guns for big unions, helping to agitate in unusually militant campaigns against corporations and austerity budgets. Others are working to draw attention to the massive influx of corporate cash into the electoral system post-*Citizens United*, while still more are fighting the National Defense Authorization Act and have successfully challenged its most troubling provisions in federal court. Home liberation efforts are taking place around the country—from Occupiers’ support of a high-profile rent strike led by Latino women in Brooklyn to under-the-radar house reclamations in the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago’s South Side. Partly thanks to the light that Occupy Wall Street has shined on it, the NYPD’s use of a discriminatory stop-and-frisk policy has declined dramatically. Meanwhile, the Strike Debt campaign being mounted by Occupiers in New York is developing online memes and public assemblies meant to mobilize those suffering from predatory lending into a mass movement [see Astra

Taylor, page 17].

As a popular Occupy Wall Street poster proclaimed last fall, “All of our grievances are connected.” In that spirit, people who were once focused on only one of these issues have started working closely with those involved in others, stitching them together through action into a cohesive platform—even without a governing body or a political party.

Though they’ve been stepping outside their Occupy comfort zones in these campaigns, the people radicalized by the movement continue to reflect and strategize with like-minded comrades. Through Occupy Nashville, Kate Savage became part of the Anarchist Cotillion, a group meant “to support each other in terms of being political radicals,” she said. In New York, a regular reading group on direct action gathers at spaces often used for OWS meetings.

“There’s something every day of every week to follow, so much is going on,” said Joan Donovan, an organizer with Occupy LA and InterOccupy, a network that connects Occupiers around the world online and through conference calls. “Occupy has always felt to me like a social experiment, a beta test for a much larger-scale, global movement.” To this end, InterOccupy may eventually grow into “InterMovement,” making its tools available beyond the subculture of self-identified Occupiers. “The idea of occupation as a tactic—it had an expiration date,” she adds. “But what doesn’t are all the networks we can build.”

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While the uprising in Tahrir Square last year inspired American radicals to believe in the power of civil resistance, it also left us with a terrible misconception. News reports furnished the impression that, with the help of Silicon Valley’s latest gizmos, a revolution can begin and end inside of a month. The outcome thus far in Egypt, however, has been a painful reminder that this isn’t so. In fact, those who’d been preparing for revolution the longest—the Muslim Brotherhood—were the people most prepared to lead it. Here in the United States, the absence of total upheaval by the end of the fall has compelled those Occupiers who didn’t simply give up to recognize that transformational movements happen over the course of years, in fits and starts, through unpredictable outbursts that emerge from a backdrop of patient, nontelevised organizing.

Whether we call it “Occupy” or something else, the spirit that made so much sense to so many of us in the Occupy movement is only finished if we let it be—or if we wait for someone else to do it. Organizing with the people around us to build power and resist corruption is something we can all do, wherever we find ourselves. Imagine people sitting around their dinner tables, for example, discussing how corporate power might be vulnerable and ways of exploiting it. What would happen if some of the ingenuity that we normally put into making viral videos of cats—or weighing consumer choices, or simply complaining—went into building grassroots power or thinking about how to circumvent police repression? If a people-power campaign had as many Facebook followers as your average breakfast cereal, it would be a force to reckon with online. If there were as many people marching in the streets of a given city as regularly fill its football stadium, the whole city would have to listen. Revolution really isn’t as hard as it might seem.

Throughout the spring and into the summer, fresh inspiration came from movements abroad. The students in Quebec filled the streets of their cities night after night, and Occupiers banged on pots and pans in concert with them. In Mexico, another movement named after a hashtag, #YoSoy132, shook up the presidential elections. Members of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot went to prison to remind Vladimir Putin that his days are numbered. Occupiers saw their own reflection in each of these, saw their movement as only one part of a larger nexus of movements all over the world.

Just a year ago, few people knew what a general assembly or an affinity group was; now many, many more have participated in one. Thousands have occupied public spaces and been arrested for their convictions who might otherwise have thought the police were there to protect them. Young people who were once merely interested in social change are now committed to it.

“A year ago, the movement was something I could schedule into my life,” said Marisa Holmes, a filmmaker in her mid-20s who was one of the original OWS planners. “Now the movement *is* my life.”

She and others planning for the anniversary celebrations around September 17 are trying to avoid overpromising, as they did for the one-day “general strike” attempted on May Day. S17, as it’s called, is being thought of less as a turning point than as a necessary milestone, a simple reminder of the duty to keep resisting. Rather than a May Day–style apocalypse, it’s more like a holy day of obligation.

They’re calling for people from around the country to converge on New York City for a weekend of music, art and organizing. Then, on Monday—S17 itself—they’ll show that “all roads lead to Wall Street” with civil disobedience in the Financial District. Until then, organizers are doing Occupy “99 Percent Pub Crawls” through the New York bar scene to spread the word and practice causing trouble.

“It’s largely symbolic; we’re not really shutting down Wall Street,” Holmes said. “That’s more long-term, not something you can do in one day.”

On August 1, I got a text message from David DeGraw, an organizer who led a little-known, Anonymous-fueled attempt to occupy Zuccotti Park in June 2011, before #occupywallstreet was even a hashtag. It said: “Any use for free tents? Have a thousand of them!!”

I don’t think this is over yet.

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