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Thank You Anarchists

Nathan Schneider | December 19, 2011

It is becoming something of a refrain among the well-meaning multitudes now energized by Occupy Wall Street that the movement needs to shed its radical origins so as to actually get something done. “If they can avoid fetishizing the demand for consensus,” [James Miller wrote in late October](#) ^[1] in the *New York Times*, “they may be able to forge a broader coalition that includes friends and allies within the Democratic Party and the union movement.” [According to some activists](#) ^[2], groups like Van Jones’ Rebuild the Dream are poised to turn occupiers into Obama voters. Especially as the 2012 election season starts, the thinking goes, it’s time to get real.

This actually reminds me of long debates about planning that took place in the NYC General Assembly before September 17, and then again during the early days of the occupation. Many people—myself included, though I was there to observe as a reporter—first arrived with some preconceived agenda about what needed to be done given the current political situation and how the occupation should do it: abolish corporate personhood, or enact a Tobin tax, or (as crasser signs would say) “Eat the Rich.” They complained that the anarchists, along with assorted autonomists, libertarian socialists and so forth, were hijacking the movement’s progress by bogging it down in process. But, after a while, after enough long meetings, they started to come around.

For some who were experiencing it for the first time, the General Assembly became a cathartic opportunity to unload long-pent-up polemics. Perhaps never having really had their political voices heard off the Internet, newcomers would interrupt the agenda and turn the people’s mic into a soapbox. With practice, though, that would change. They’d find that hewing to the process was better than making off-topic speeches. They heard stories about the assemblies in occupied squares in Egypt, Greece and Spain firsthand from people who had been there. Helping shape the daily decisions of the Occupation started to seem actually more empowering than trying to tell Obama what to do.

The anarchists’ way of operating was changing our very idea of what politics could be in the first place. This was exhilarating. Some occupiers told me they wanted to take it home with them, to organize assemblies in their own communities. It’s no accident, therefore, that when occupations spread around the country, the horizontal assemblies spread too.

At its core, anarchism isn’t simply a negative political philosophy, or an excuse for window-breaking, as most people tend to assume it is. Even while calling for an end to the rule of coercive states backed by military bases, prison industries and subjugation, anarchists and other autonomists try to build a culture in which people can take care of themselves and each other through healthy, sustainable communities.

Many are resolutely nonviolent. Drawing on modes of organizing as radical as they are ancient, they insist on using forms of participatory direct democracy that naturally resist corruption by money, status and privilege. Everyone's basic needs should take precedence over anyone's greed.

Through the Occupy movement, these assemblies have helped open tremendous space in American political discourse. They've started new conversations about what people really want for their communities, conversations that amazingly still haven't been hijacked, as they might otherwise might be, by charismatic celebrities or special interests. But these assemblies also pose a problem.

The Occupiers know that more traditional political organizations—such as labor unions, political parties and advocacy groups—are critical to making their message heard. With [the "Re-Occupy" action on December 17](#) ^[3], they called upon Trinity Wall Street, an Episcopal church, to grant the movement an outdoor public space. As the movement enters the winter and so-called "Phase II," outside organizations seem to be ever more crucial. But unions, parties and churches aren't the coziest of bedfellows for open assemblies. Precisely what enables these organizations to mobilize masses of people and resources is the fact that they are hierarchical. Moreover, they are financed by, and dirty their hands with, electoral politics—all things a horizontal assembly aims to avoid.

But traditional organizations that have found new momentum in the Occupy movement don't need to sit around and wait for the assemblies to come up with demands or certain types of actions. They can act "autonomously" as the anarchists would say, doing what they do best with the good of the whole movement in mind: pressuring lawmakers, mobilizing their memberships and pushing for change in the short term while the getting is good. They can build coalitions on common ground with the Tea Party. The occupier assemblies won't do these things for them, and it would be a mistake to wish they would.

The radicals who lent this movement so much of its character have offered American political life a gift, should we choose to accept it. They've reminded us that we don't have to rely on Republicans or Democrats, or Clintons, Bushes or Sarah Palin, to do our politics for us. With the assemblies, they've bestowed a refreshing form of grassroots organizing that, if it lasts, might help keep the rest of the system a bit more honest. There will, however, be tensions.

"Any organization is welcome to support us," says the [Statement of Autonomy](#) ^[4] passed by the Occupy Wall Street General Assembly on November 1, "with the knowledge that doing so will mean questioning your own institutional frameworks of work and hierarchy and integrating our principles into your modes of action."

Kevin Zeese of the Freedom Plaza occupation in Washington, DC, though certainly no anarchist, is even more militant against the "progressive" establishment: "Bought and paid for with millions of dollars from Wall Street, the health insurance industry and big energy interests, Obama and the Democrats are part of the problem, not the solution."

In countries like Spain, Greece and Argentina for instance, networks of local assemblies, often built around occupations, have shaped electoral politics even without forming parties or endorsing candidates. Their focus is on the people in them, not those who would purport to represent them. I was in Athens earlier this fall, just as the prime minister was stepping down and the economy was collapsing, and I [found](#) ^[5] that those in the city's assemblies weren't really concerned; they were too busy saving local parks and resisting unfair taxes.

Spain recently held a general election, and parties across the political spectrum were responding to issues

raised by the assembly-based movement which began there in May and which profoundly influenced the organizers of Occupy Wall Street. Even so, the movement called on people to cast null votes. The right-wingers won. Many on the left here will see this as a dangerous precedent, but in the long term and the big picture, autonomists see it as better than being co-opted. There is more at stake than a contest between one status-quo party or another. Occupations and assemblies are not solely an American, Greek or Spanish phenomenon; they're the basis of a new global justice movement to confront a global crisis.

As assemblies enter our own politics through the Occupy movement, we should take care to recognize what they're not and will never be. Even more important, though, is what they've already done. They've reminded us that politics is not a matter of choosing among what we're offered but of fighting for what we and others actually need, not to mention what we hope for. For this, in large part, we have the anarchists to thank.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/26/opinion/will-extremists-hijack-occupy-wall-street.html>

[2] <http://october2011.org/blogs/kevin-zeese/van-jones-and-democratic-party-operatives-you-do-not-represent-occupy-movement>

[3] <http://wagingnonviolence.org/2011/12/why-occupy-calls-for-sanctuary/>

[4] <http://www.nycga.net/resources/statement-of-autonomy/>

[5] <http://wagingnonviolence.org/?p=13480>