

Occupy – the assembly process is the revolution

Andrew Flood

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As we prepare to enter the 3rd month of the Occupy movement a commonly heard criticism targets both the lack of clear demands and the related complex and often drawn out decision-making processes being used at Occupy General Assemblies. These criticisms however miss the point, against the traditional left with its package of pre-set answers (best before 1917) what makes Occupy different is that process of decision making through assembly. The assembly form is not just a way of making decisions but also a different form of doing politics. The Assembly is in embryo the different world we seek to create.

I'm not arguing that the process is everything or especially the only thing that matters. Of course the questions asked and decisions reached will also determine the direction of the movement. A perfect process that led back to parliamentary politics, banks with a kinder face or the imposition of Brehon law would get us nowhere good. But right now the successful development and expansion of the assembly process is what is transformative about Occupy with regards to the old left. For sure students of history will tell you these are old methods being re-discovered or reinvented but all the same it is exciting to see them being taken up by a new generation.

Occupy Wall Street started 17th September and in the month that followed copycat Occupy camps sprang up in more than 1,100 cities across the globe. Solidarity demonstrations were held on all continents, even Antarctica. In London, England the state church was thrown into crisis as it debated evicting the camp on the door step of St Paul's and in Oakland, USA the violent police eviction of the camp there led to a mass assembly of 3,000 which called the Oakland General Strike of November 2nd.

What is the assembly?

What characterises all the Occupy's is that at the heart of the movement is an open assembly of everyone who identifies with it. Potentially open to all of the 99%- which is the appeal of the form to those who are used to having politicians and the 1% speak for them. At these assemblies proposals are put, concerns are debated and decisions are made. These decisions are seldom by a simple 51% majority but rather made using variations of consensus decision making, a process that makes it hard if not impossible for a majority to simply force a decision on a minority through numbers alone. This slows the process down but it also prevent premature splits arising from controversial decisions being forced through by narrow majorities.

Much of the conventional left in both its reformist and revolutionary forms is openly frustrated with that aspect of the Occupy movement. In Dublin as in other cities the approach that has all too often been made by the already organised left to the Occupy movement has a strong resemblance to the biblical legend of Moses coming down off the mountain with the 10 commandments. The approach is that the wise ones arrive with the pre-packaged answers and seek to find the quickest route to get the multitude below to adopt these answers as their own. People are lectured, browbeaten and even bullied into accepting the accumulated wisdom of decades, decades the left has actually spent wandering in circles.

This approach of the left is wrong for several reasons. The first one is that it is simply counter productive, a return to an educational process that most resembles that in place when teachers were also allowed to beat the answers into students. It is not surprising that the 'we are here to tell you how things are' tends to elicit a strong negative response from those who are to be

schooled. Elsewhere I've blogged the specifics of these problems in Dublin so I don't intend to repeat this argument here. (blog 1, blog 2)

The positives

Instead, I want to highlight the two strongest points of value in the assembly process.

The first is that to anyone paying attention in the last decade it is very clear that despite the deep crisis of capitalism the left does not have the answers. In fact it often appears that most left groups don't even have many of the questions that need to be asked. Sure there are some general broad answers we can claim to have but in particular those organisations and individuals who insist that all that is needed is the correct interpretation of scripture as laid down 130 years ago by Mistery Marx & Engels are profoundly unconvincing.

The old style pursuit of needed new answers (and questions) for the left would be to retreat to the British Library or some other Ivory Tower for a couple of decades to formulate some new set of answers. There has been some 'flash in the pan' attempts at this, some have even briefly seized the imagination, Hardt & Negri's *Empire* did so for a while back in 2000 as the summit protest movement peaked and now and again others have briefly done the same since. The truth is though that this process of relying on smart individuals to formulate answers is itself flawed. It is reflective of something that was perhaps possible back in the 14th century when a single person might have some hope of consuming the accumulated sum of formal human knowledge (in western Europe). Today when 48 hours of new content are uploaded to youtube every minute such a task is an impossible one for an individual or small group to even hope to approach.

The generation of questions, never mind answers can only be part of a collective process involving tens of thousands of people at a minimum, with a huge range of experiences, not just of bearded old white dudes in the British library. At one point people might have expected this process to emerge from the universities but even apart from the narrow range of experience they contain today they are increasingly designed as factories to reproduce the current system, even in those sections that imagine they exist to challenge it.

The internet and in particular Facebook & Twitter have been focused on as organising tools by many analysts who are trying to understand the emerging movement. But actually they are much more than tools to call people to protests, the circulation of links and the discussions taking place under 10 million updates about Occupy are also a massive, if informal and unstated, collective educational process.

It is in the 1100 assemblies of the Occupy Movement scattered across the globe (and the earlier assemblies in Tahir, Barcelona and Syntagma) that this collective process of identifying the questions and in time the answers is starting to take form. For sure it is a process that is messy, slow and that at least on the local level often takes a one or two steps back for each 2 or 3 leaps forward. But it is a process that is discovering itself, that is essentially self-organising, a path to knowledge that we are finding by walking. The left has had a program (or rather conflicting program's) for over 100 years, programs that any reasonable person now realizes are quite incomplete. A little patience with this Occupy movement taking 1, 2 or 20 months to create something better is not so unreasonable.

Another way is coming into being

The second reason the assembly model is not a barrier to be overcome, to be replaced with a more traditional committee of wise (mostly) men, is that the assemblies are the different way of doing 'politics' we need. For a long time politics has mostly meant one particular model, the model where the politician's present us with their program and our role is simply to choose between these programs either with ballots or rifles (or even one in each hand). A methodology that inevitably replaces one hierarchy with another when one set of politicians successfully replace another.

There is however another less visible model. That is the assembly, not as a way of controlling the politicians but of replacing them. And for politicians here we can also substitute employer or landlord because democracy in the streets means little without democracy in the workplace and in our housing. We don't want to change who the 1% are, who among the 1% rules us we want to take the 99%, all of the 99% into power. Not some 1% selected to represent the 99% and make decisions for us but once more and forever the 99% directly deciding for ourselves how our world should be run.

The idea of a political process that has at its core decision making meetings where all of us can bring suggestions, make critiques and take part in the final decision is what makes Occupy revolutionary far more than whatever demands are formulated. It is the process itself that is potentially transformative, even in the most weak and dysfunctional assemblies. If the assembly can be the mechanism by which we organize a camp or organize a general strike then why can it not also be the mechanism by which we organize our workplace, our school or our neighborhood. And when the assemblies spread and meet up where then is the room for the politicians who instead want to represent us.

The assembly v the politician

This is not a new concept, the assembly is as old and almost certainly older than the politician. The two have in fact been in conflict with each other for many long years. It was the assemblies that liquidated the power of the Czar in Russia in 1917 only to be liquidated in turn by the Bolsheviks who formed the new government of politicians. In Chiapas in Southern Mexico hundreds of Zapatista communities have used the assembly as their root method of making decisions since (and before) they entered into rebellion in 1994. The Zapatista assembly model that will be 18 years old this new year. When Argentina went into crisis in 1999 and the people said of the politicians that 'they all must go' the assembly emerged in both workplace and neighborhood as the way to keep society functioning as government after government fell.

The assembly and the politician will always be locked in a combat to the death, regardless if that politician is of the right, left or center. The two models are incompatible, either the people rule or the politicians rule and that applies as much at the small local level of an Occupy assembly as at the national or regional level. And let us be clear, the politician is not simply someone who embraces that term in some formal way. It is also the person who informally declares that they should have a special right in the making of decisions because of who they are or what they have done — because in other words they know better. The politician is the one that seeks to flatter those they think can be won to their side and to browbeat those they think can not rather than

engaging in open and honest debate. The politician hates the assembly process as constituting a barrier to 'what is to be done' and seeks to either abolish it or restrict just who is allowed to take part.

The Occupy assemblies are a long way from forming the new world in the shell of the old. Only a very few have had a major local impact, Occupy Oakland being the most obvious of the bunch. Most are small and isolated, a cluster of tents in the vast cities of the disinterested. In many places the General Assembly & the processes and dynamics it contains are quite dysfunctional — all too often as in Dublin due to the attempts by the old left to quickly push its answers through. But for all these problems this scattering of 1100 assemblies across the globe is a start, a start in the process that is not about reforming banking laws or tweaking constitutions but building a new world.

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