

# **From alterglobalization to Occupy Wall Street**

**Neoanarchism and the new spirit of the left**

Blair Taylor

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**Abstract:** Seattle WTO demonstrations in 1999 to its recent incarnation in the Occupy Wall Street movement, this article argues that neanarchism’s attempts to “change the world without taking power” pose serious theoretical and practical problems for emancipatory politics today. The text also examines recuperation as a factor in social movement decline, arguing that the incorporation of social movement themes is constructing a “new spirit of capitalism” that both addresses widespread demand for a more ethical world while simultaneously insulating itself from critique — a process facilitated by significant ideological resonance between neanarchism and neoliberalism.

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Between September left activism 30 November 1999 and 11 2001, a surge of radical swept across the USA and many other parts of the globe to contest the institutions of global neoliberalism. Forged against the backdrop of the collapse of communism, the decline of the labor movement, a triumphant neoliberal consensus, and a left landscape shaped largely by feminism, ecology and antiracism, the radicalism at the core of the alterglobalization movement (AGM) that emerged at the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial protests in Seattle was characterized by a new political sensibility uniting a diversity of concerns, often under the ideological umbrella of anarchism.<sup>1</sup> Departing significantly from both the Marxism of the New Left and classical anarchism, some have dubbed this emergent politics ‘neanarchism’ (Castells 2005).

Fast forward a decade. The financial crisis of 2008 belatedly vindicates the AGM as the deregulation, deindustrialization and outsourcing advocated by neoliberalism are widely cited as key factors behind the collapse, Keynesianism is revived and the cover of Newsweek proclaims ‘we are all socialists now’ (16 February 2009). Despite his neoliberal pedigree, the Obama campaign successfully tapped into widespread economic dissatisfaction with the slogans ‘Hope’ and ‘Change’, simultaneously playing up his background as a community organizer and even directly borrowing the motto ‘Yes We Can’ from the United Farm Worker movement once led by Cesar Chavez. For a brief moment before being eclipsed by the Tea Party, his administration held out the solution of a ‘Green New Deal’ that could save the planet and capitalism through renewable energy, eco-retrofitting and other green enterprises. Ideas and practices only recently confined to the margins of the radical environmental movement were suddenly thrust center stage. Spearheaded by exradical turned presidential advisor Van Jones, his fate is instructive. Appointed to be Obama’s green jobs czar and chief architect of the proposed green economy, he was forced to resign when his past involvement with radical left groups of the AGM was uncovered by right-wing media.

Yet ultimately the spectacular implosion of neoliberalism in 2008 resulted in, paradoxically, more neoliberalism — bailouts for banks and large corporations, austerity for the populace. The movement slogan ‘another world is possible’ has been rebuked by a zombie neoliberalism that insists ‘there is no alternative’. The emergence of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) has challenged this narrative by problematizing economic inequality and the neoliberal discourse that legitimated

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as the ‘global justice movement’, I will use the term ‘alterglobalization’ throughout the text. The ‘anti-globalization’ moniker assigned by media commentators fundamentally misrepresents the nature of the movement, in terms of rhetoric, international scope of action, seminal inspiration from the developing world and indigenous groups, and the actual global makeup of activists from even the first North American movement action in Seattle. This paper presents its argument using a methodological combination of discursive analysis of primary documents as well as secondary texts, ethnographic observation, participant interviews and critical theoretic interrogation.

it, and reintroduced the words ‘class’ and ‘capitalism’ back into political debate. Occupy Wall Street represents the convergence of a populism animated by those directly hit by the economic crisis with previously existing neoanarchist activists. Its anarchist-inflected politics draws heavily from the AGM of a decade before; movement calls for leaderless direct democracy, critique of corporate power, commitment to anti-oppression politics, radical pluralism and emphasis on direct action directly build on the neoanarchist politics of the North American AGM. Indeed, many key activists who laid the groundwork for OWS, such as David Graeber and Marina Sitrin, are veterans of the main organization of the AGM, the Direct Action Network (DAN). Will OWS share the AGM’s fate?

Modern capitalism has increasingly come to speak the language of social movements: sustainability, authenticity, fairness, freedom. How did the language of the left become the language of business? I propose that an important part of the answer lies in the historical development of left social movements from the New Left through the AGM and OWS today. This article looks at the relationship between social movements and power in an attempt to better understand their interpenetration and mutual codetermination within capitalism, and some implications for emancipatory social change today. This text will address five main themes: first, it will examine several explanations for the decline of the AGM; second, offer an alternative narrative that emphasizes the process of *recuperation*; third, outline a critique of neoanarchism that highlights affinities with neoliberalism that have made it especially prone to recuperation; fourth, explore how this has transformed both the left and contemporary capitalism; and finally, examine how this legacy both lives on and is being challenged in OWS today.

## **Theorizing alterglobalization movement decline**

Accounts of the decline of the AGM focus on the same handful of explanatory factors: repression and the radically changed political context post-9/11 (Bello 2002; Callinicos 2002; Day 2005), the resulting shift to an anti-war frame (Dixon and Epstein 2007) or tactical fixation as a substitute for political strategy (Epstein 2001). These explanations map closely onto key explanatory concepts in social movement theory such as political repression (Davenport, Johnson, and Mueller 2005), changes in political opportunity structure (Tarrow 1998), frame exhaustion (Benford and Snow 2000) and repertoire stasis (Tilly 2008). The following section briefly outlines these analyses’ relative strengths and weaknesses, in order to suggest another important demobilizing dynamic.

Defining what was famously dubbed a ‘movement of movements’ can prove difficult (Mertes 2002). Although a vast diversity of labor, environmental, human rights, faith and other groups actively organized for and participated in what became the anti-globalization movement, I will contend that what distinguished this era of movement activity was its shared *repertoire*, the set of various protest-related tools and actions available to a movement or related organization in a given timeframe (Tilly 2008). The core of the AGM converged around a shared tactic — mass nonviolent direct action directed at the institutions of neoliberalism — which established a continuity of targets, tactics and organizations which gave the movement its specific political and organizational character, and differentiated it from earlier and later campaigns. These actions were primarily carried out by affinity groups coordinated through the DAN, a short-lived anarchist organization that rapidly institutionalized a repertoire of nonviolent direct action carried out by affinity groups and coordinated by spokescouncil meetings committed to nonhierarchical

internal organization governed by consensus decision-making. In this way, a relatively small number of activists created a new generational political hegemony through a movement culture that made a strenuously democratic medium the message (Graeber 2002).

Some observers have pointed to the failure to generalize this repertoire into a viable political strategy, or *repertoire exhaustion*, as an important factor in movement decline (Epstein 2001; Martinez 2000). This explanation has the merit of stressing movement agency by emphasizing internal dynamics, yet is often insufficiently attuned to broader structural constraints. This agentic narrative finds its opposite in explanations focused on changes in the *political opportunity structure* (Tarrow 1998). This approach stresses the importance of openings and closures in the broader political context which mediate the reception of movement action, thus highlighting forces largely beyond activist control. Such accounts identify 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror, launched by the Bush administration, as a critical shift in the political opportunity structure, which made the reception of dissent less viable against the backdrop of a nation under terrorist attack and legitimated increased repression (Bello 2002; Callinicos 2002; Day 2005). Such explanations have a certain undeniable power, but also downplay the role of movement agency in navigating them, ignoring both that 9/11 was itself the act of a political movement, and that it only sped up a decline in numbers and efficacy that had already begun immediately after Seattle.

Still other analyses stress changes in political *frame*, claiming that the movement did not die, but rather continued in another form by shifting with the times from an anti-neoliberal to anti-war orientation (Dixon and Epstein 2007; Callinicos 2002). Although there certainly was a change in targets and frame, however, this explanation overlooks the substantial political, organizational, demographic and tactical differences between the alterglobalization and anti-war movements in order to posit a smooth continuity that did not in fact exist.

## **An alternative explanation: recuperation**

Changes in political opportunity structure, repertoire exhaustion, repression and frame realignment are all important explanatory factors in the decline of the AGM. However, I wish to reverse the assumptions of these formulations, asking instead if the movement faded not because it failed, but rather because it succeeded, in partial and unintended ways. I propose an alternative explanation for movement demobilization — the recuperation of movement themes into mainstream political and economic discourse. I contend that this movement, building on predecessors from the 1960s to the 1990s, successfully popularized a critique of unethical corporations and the international financial organizations that champion their interests, creating mass demand for an ethical universe while at the same time leaving deeper structures of global capitalism largely unproblematized and thus well positioned to meet these new desires. Unable to offer an alternative social vision and viable political avenues capable of meeting these new ethical desires, the movement declined, aided by internal ideological and organizational constraints. Meanwhile, its halffinished project was taken up instead by the dominant social forces of the day, by neoliberal capital stepping in with a variety of new ethical goods, services and discourses to fill this ethical vacuum.

Recuperation is the process of opposition and critique becoming incorporated and constitutive of a new order. Thus, it is similar to concepts such as cooptation, or what Tarrow (1998) calls the 'selective facilitation' of movement demands. These concepts link movement demobilization

to conscious elite strategies of curtailing movements by meeting some of their demands, funneling contentious actors into state channels and incorporating movement leaders into government, non-governmental organization (NGO) or business positions. Yet rather than a top-down affair where elites intentionally cherry-pick ideas and actors to frustrate movement goals, recuperation is a much more expansive and multidirectional process; it includes both intentional and unintentional borrowing from social movements that might be sincere or cynical. Not reducible to simple ‘greenwashing’ or ‘selling out’, movements act as social entrepreneurs that can offer useful tools and ideas for addressing social problems or meeting needs. In this view, social movements function as canaries in the mine — the vanguard of social conflict detection — as well as a social resource offering imaginative solutions to social problems, free of charge.

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s (2000) book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* is an instructive theorization of recuperation, detailing how elements of what they term the ‘artistic’ critique of the New Left were incorporated by French firms to entice the disaffected and well-educated ‘68 generation back into the workforce in the wake of the May – June rebellion. What began as a cynically instrumental appropriation was found to not only enhance worker satisfaction but also efficiency and profitability. In their analysis, it was not the rediscovery of rightist classical liberals like Hayek, but rather New Left critiques of a suffocating post-war Fordist consensus, which gave ethical impetus to the corrosive flux of neoliberalism. *New Spirit* theorizes the dialectic between the decline of the New Left and the rise of a new form of capitalism inured from earlier lines of critique, illustrating how even the most oppositional ideas can become not only compatible with, but constitutive of a newly reconfigured social order.

Nancy Fraser (2009) has identified similar ‘elective affinities’ between neoliberalism and Second Wave feminist critiques of traditional patriarchal authority and the family wage; Carl Boggs (2000) and Thomas Frank (1997) have detailed the strong resonance between countercultural leftism and business discourse, while Adolph Reed (1979) has described similar recuperative dynamics at work within the Civil Rights Movement. Bringing the tradition of critical theory into conversation with social movement theory, I apply this line of analysis to the neoanarchist politics of the AGM, arguing that the AGM won a Pyrrhic victory, creating demand for an ethical world that helped put itself out of business. Instead of challenging commodification, it laid the groundwork for the commodification of movement politics.

## **The alterglobalization movement and the new spirit of capitalism**

‘When business advice warmly embraces chaos, celebrates the collapsing of high and low, and heralds the demolition of intellectual order as a profit-maximizing opportunity, it’s time to dust off those much-vilified metanarratives ... The cultural crisis of our time cannot be understood without reference to the fact that certain modes of cultural dissidence that arose in the sixties are today indistinguishable from management theory.’ (Frank and Weiland, 1997, pp. 14 – 15)

Cut free from the Marxism of the New Left, the Seattle generation of activists was the vanguard of ethical consumption: boycotts, veganism, local/bioregional food, sweatshop-free products, Do It Yourself (DIY) and handcrafted goods, biofueled vehicles and militant reuse all figured prominently in movement repertoire and discourse (Klein 2002; Mertes 2002). While the movement’s

anarchist wing articulated an explicit critique of capitalism, at the same time it remained heavily focused on personal consumption, direct action and other prefigurative political practices combined with a pronounced rhetorical emphasis on autonomy. Ten years later ideas like voluntary simplicity, alternative energy, carbon footprint tracking, local/ organic/slow foods and various other practices pioneered by social movements have become part of mainstream political discourse and consumer habitus. Today, even the muchmaligned Walmart carries organic and fairtrade products, at the behest of the first lady. Parallel trends can be observed in the sphere of work, where left critiques of the grey conformity of Fordist drudgery have been incorporated into the neoliberal reorganization of production in the form of decentralized networked workplaces, flexible labor, part-time and project employment, informality and greater employee self-management, alongside the corporate institutionalization of socially responsible investment and corporate social responsibility codes. Even CrimethInc., neo-Situationist anarchists who championed lifestyle politics and an anti-work ethos, note the shift:

‘history rendered our experiment obsolete, perversely granting our demand for an unemployable class ... the economic crisis eroded this and gave a decidedly involuntary flavor to joblessness. It turns out capitalism has no more use for us than we have for it.’ (CrimethInc. Collective 2010)

Taken together, these trends comprise a new economic ideal type quickly elicited from any hopeful undergraduate as: creative, informational/post-material, ethical, green and affective (Boltanski and Chiapello 2000; Frank 2000; Sennett 2006).

Yet until the recent and rather brief emergence of OWS, these transformations have occurred at the same time as a decline in the social movements that first described these problems and offered such solutions. I contend this is not an accidental relationship; I suggest that efforts to render consumption and production ethical have in turn commodified politics, creating market demand for an ethical universe more easily met by savvy economic and political entrepreneurs than by social movements. The result has been a critique dulled by resonance with business discourse and a concomitant weakening of the left as a project of social transformation. How did this come to pass? An important factor was the ascendance and eventual hegemony of a new political discourse that crystallized in the radical left of the AGM: a neoanarchist political orientation defined by a micropolitical and prefigurative politics deeply wary of power, a moralistic and often personalistic economic analysis that emphasized both consumption and alternatives, and a predilection for tactics in lieu of political strategy. The next section will show how this politics developed, illustrating that even the most militant segment of a movement challenging neoliberalism mirrored and ultimately reinforced it in important ways.

## **From classical anarchism to neoanarchism**

While the literature on globalization is immense, there has been much less attention devoted to the neoanarchist politics of the AGM, and even less to its broader impact on the left. This is especially striking when compared to academic output dealing with the politics of the New Left. Much of the literature that does address this ideological realignment is insufficiently critical, framing this development as a logical and salutary corrective to the problems of Marxism while overlooking theoretical and practical difficulties posed by contemporary anarchist theory and

praxis (Graeber 2002; Day 2005). This section will examine this new political constellation, the factors which influenced the shift to anarchism, how it differs from classical anarchism and the political consequences of a politics which seeks to ‘change the world without taking power’.<sup>2</sup>

Neoanarchism can perhaps best be understood as an attempt to revive the revolutionary project in the wake of the authoritarian legacy of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Marxism, while addressing the expanded terrains of power and struggle initiated by the New Left. In contrast to their Marxist contemporaries, classical anarchists like Bakunin, Kropotkin and Goldman saw the state as an instrument of domination by its very nature, and rejected wielding it as a means for social revolution. Yet at the same time, classical anarchists also sought to secure and exercise power in alternative institutions such as syndicates or federated communities. Far from rejecting all forms of coercive power, it was implicit in anarchist calls for class war, one big union or the revolutionary violence expressed in the slogan ‘propaganda of the deed’.

While classical anarchism was primarily concerned with the state and capitalism, strong parallel currents also existed within the tradition. Anti-racist, feminist and ecological concerns were visible in the antidiscriminatory membership policies of the Industrial Workers of the World union, Goldman’s anarchy-feminism or Kropotkin’s nascent environmentalism. Yet these aspects largely remained on the sidelines of both anarchism and the left more broadly, subordinated to the class struggle, evident in the bitter criticisms of Goldman that argued sexual emancipation was divisive and ‘middle class’ in nature (ironically, one of her most vociferous critics was fellow anarchist-communist and woman of color Lucy Parsons; see Falk 1990, 66). Not until the experience of the New Left would the left definitively expand its purview beyond state and capital, to include relations between men and women, people racialized as white and those of color, straight and queer, humanity and the natural world. Indeed, one appeal of neoanarchism is that it offers a political tradition potentially able to tie together the disparate causes and single issues splintered in the wake of the New Left and subsequent collapsing hegemony of Marxism. Neoanarchism puts these struggles on equal footing by encompassing diverse forms of oppression in a broad critique of hierarchy and domination in all forms.

This shift is both analytical and strategic; thus for neoanarchist writers such as Graeber (2009), Holloway (2002a), Day (2005) and Critchley (2008a), an aversion to statism isn’t enough – what is required is a radical politics appropriate to the diffuse nature of contemporary power which seeks to root out all forms of coercion. Although John Holloway identifies as an autonomous Marxist rather than an anarchist, his popular book *Change the World without Taking Power* nonetheless provides an exemplary formulation of neoanarchist politics:

‘If revolution through the winning of state power has proved to be an illusion, this does not mean that we should abandon the question of revolution. But we must think of it in other terms: not as the taking of power, but as the dissolution of power.’  
(Holloway 2002a, 2)

Circumspect about replacing one form of hegemony with another, neoanarchism recasts the radical project as one of resisting and maintaining autonomy from power. Neoanarchist (and the closely related, if not indistinguishable, autonomist and postanarchist) literature is united by a discourse of ‘temporary autonomous zones’ (Bey 1991), attempts at ‘impeding the flow’ of power

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<sup>2</sup> Although an autonomist Marxist, the title of John Holloway’s (2002a) book, *Change the World without Taking Power*, nicely captures the ethos of neoanarchism and is popular in this milieu.



(Day 2005), maintaining an ‘interstitial distance within the state’ (Critchley 2008a), ‘screams’ of negation (Holloway 2002a), Deleuzian ‘lines of flight’ away from power (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) or autonomist calls for ‘exodus’ (Hardt and Negri 2009). Any notion of unified political strategy is replaced by a pluralistic flowering of autonomous projects, practices, communities and institutions, embodied in the Zapatista saying, ‘one no many yeses’ (Kingsnorth 2003). For writers like Graeber (2002) and Day (2005), neoanarchism centers on a prefigurative politics — an approach to social change focused on movement forms and practices which ‘prefigure’ in the here and now the qualities desired in the good society. This typically includes consensus decisionmaking, an expressive political style, antiauthoritarian lifestyles, ethical consumption, and a rejection of rigid ideologies and organizational forms. Theoretical and practical differences exist however; while Critchley (2008a) broadly shares these commitments, he finds consensus akin to the depoliticization of liberalism, offering Derridean dissensus in its stead. Thus to multiply sites of contestation, he articulates an ‘infinitely demanding’ ethics that entails carving out authentically political space at an ‘interstitial distance’ from power. Yet despite minor variation and divergent emphases, all of these thinkers share Graeber’s (2002, 68) concise summary of neoanarchist politics: ‘exposing, delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning everlarger spaces of autonomy from it’.

## **The strange bedfellows of neoanarchism and neoliberalism**

Neoanarchism’s commitment to resistance, autonomy and pluralism does not congeal into a shared positive alternative social vision to capitalism and the liberal state. In the absence of any clearly articulated institutions or mechanism of social organization, neoanarchism’s autonomist pluralism appears quite compatible with market society. As Slavoj Žižek (2007) has pointed out in his debate with Critchley (2008b), the result is a posture of perpetual alterity that presumes there must always be oppressive institutional power to resist, without necessarily transcending it. This political subjectivity discursively echoes two important tropes of contemporary capitalism: first, endless rebellion against the status quo, either in the creative destruction of neoliberalism or the logic of modern advertising and fashion; and second, a notion of autonomy which presumes such a distance from power is possible. Thus, it is not surprising to find other affinities between neoanarchism and neoliberalism. Both share a drive to dissolve state power, in one through the creation of autonomous spaces, in the other via privatization and markets. The commitment to consensus and hostility to ideology is consonant with the post-political tenor of ‘End of History’ arguments (Fukuyama 1992); the logic of ‘exodus’ mimics the *fait accompli* of capital flight; voluntary social services like Food Not Bombs fill the vacuum of state entitlements with charity; activist projects like the Independent Media Centers rely on a DIY ethos of voluntarism that shadows the disappearance of professional careers in fields like journalism into the democratic yet unpaid ‘blogosphere’; ‘infinite responsibility’ mirrors the neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility; the concomitant micropolitics of voluntary simplicity and ethical consumption offer a constellation of guilt, asceticism and expensive ‘ethical’ commodities which render ecological practice a profitable form of left austerity. Table 1 illustrates some of these resonances between neoanarchism and neoliberalism, grouped into general ideology, consumption, production and culture.

Neoanarchism	Neoliberalism
<p>(a) Ideology and organization Dispersal of power by democracy</p> <p>Anti-state, anti-corporate</p> <p>‘The personal is the political’, micropolitics</p> <p>Anti-ideological, pluralism, Zapatista’s ‘one no many yeses’</p> <p>Decentralized leaderless networks</p> <p>Activist campaigns</p> <p>Direct action and service work: Food Not Bombs</p> <p>Anti-regulation/social service, entrepreneurial society</p> <p>Self-construction via consumption, lifestyle branding, niche markets</p> <p>Subjectivity through consumption, ‘End of History’, consumer choice, niche markets</p> <p>Horizontal network structure, social networked work, flexible labor, self-motivation</p> <p>Post-Fordist project work, subcontracting</p> <p>NGOs replacing state entitlements, religious charity</p>	<p>Dispersal of power by markets (assumed to be democratic), market populism</p>
<p>(b) Consumption Boycotts, organics, bioregionalism, anti-sweatshop</p> <p>campaigns, reuse, veganism</p> <p>simplicity, focus on personal consumption patterns</p> <p>Personalism against impersonality</p> <p>Supporting independent local businesses, cooperatives</p>	<p>10</p>
<p>Boycotts, divestment campaigns, ‘voting with your dollars’</p> <p>Austerity, individualizing responsibility for social problems</p>	<p>Fair trade, ‘no sweat’ and other consumer labeling, community-supported agriculture (CSA) and farmers’ markets</p>

## **Left-neoliberalism: the anarchist as social entrepreneur?**

Taken together, many aspects of neoliberalism are mirrored in neoanarchism, but given a left spin. Despite the rhetoric, the emphasis on boycotts, alternative products and consumer activism not only does not threaten capitalism, but in fact reinforces it by creating new markets while promoting the illusion of the powerful consumer operating within the inherently democratic market, with less attention given to detailing structural biases within market economies against ethical concerns like labor rights or ecology. These biases result in sustainable and fair-trade products which are much more expensive than their counterparts, as they must add an ethical surcharge to cover the costs of paying workers more or disposing of waste ecologically, a competitive disadvantage pitting conscience against pocketbook. Consumer-based politics also fuel a favorite right-wing stereotype, what Thomas Frank (2004) calls the ‘latte liberal’: college educated, typically white, wealthy enough to afford expensive specialized foods and products, and out of touch with or dismissive of the concerns of ‘ordinary’ people, in particular material inequality. The result is an aestheticization of politics wherein taste and cultural preference become a cipher and shorthand for politics. In the USA, the political right has deployed this reversed Gramscian strategy to great effect, by opposing a working-class cultural idiom to the French-speaking, Volvo-driving, arugula-eating liberal elitists. Of course, the disastrous impact of Republican economic policy on the working class, and the significant consensus with their Democratic counterparts on such matters, goes unmentioned.

Additionally, neoanarchist politics defines itself in opposition to a form of state power that capital has largely already defunded if not defanged. If states, with all their coercive power, have proven both unwilling and unable to tame the competitive logic of capital accumulation, it is unclear why decentralized autonomous projects would be able to fare any better. Yet alternative economic institutions feature prominently within anarchist (and perhaps unsurprisingly, liberal) discourse: cooperatives, microcredit, community gardens and community-supported agriculture are presented as institutional alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. Bookchin (1999) argues:

‘To the extent that American anarchists possessed a theory of social change, it was communitarian — a program of changing capitalist society by instituting presumably independent print shops, food coops, head shops, and even libertarian farms, organized along egalitarian and cooperative lines ... ’ (108)

While greater worker control over the workplace is an unqualified desideratum, such projects are nonetheless subject to the same competitive pressures as other firms operating within capitalist markets. Rather than expansion into the kind of counterpower capable of mounting a challenge to capitalism, the history of such experiments is one of failure: such endeavors are typically short-lived; facing bankruptcy, some lucky smaller enterprises are able to carve out niche market survival as specialty boutiques, while larger ones like Mondragon in Spain become increasingly indistinguishable from traditional firms (Kasmir 1996). Murray Bookchin (forthcoming) has pointed out limits to this strategy for social change:

‘Cooperatives that profess to be moral in their intentions have yet to make any headway in replacing big capitalist concerns or even in surviving without themselves becoming capitalistic in their methods and profit-oriented in their goals. The Proudhonist myth that small associations of producers — as opposed to a genuinely socialistic

or libertarian communistic endeavor — can slowly eat away at capitalism should finally be dispelled.’

Even the most sophisticated and explicitly political experiment with cooperatives — those which existed during the Spanish Revolution — could not escape the pressures of capitalism. There competition between cooperatives for resources and markets essentially reproduced the familiar problems of socialism in one country (Bookchin 2007, 103). Both the nature of capitalist exchange and the historical record suggest it is unlikely that such alternative economic institutions can beat capitalism at its own game, or even survive. Often, great energy is expended to offer products or services that modern capitalism can produce more cheaply and efficiently, and for dubious political gains. Ultimately, such enterprises remain hostage to the same market forces as any other business, where almost every advance for workers’ rights or ecology constitutes a competitive disadvantage against less scrupulous competitors which must be offset by higher prices. Taken together, the challenges faced by economic alternatives call to mind Adorno’s (2010, 39) warning in *Minima Moralia* that ‘wrong life cannot be lived rightly’.

## **From alterglobalization to Occupy Wall Street**

This trajectory of recuperation and movement decline explains in part the virtual absence of mass mobilization by the left in the immediate wake of the 2008 economic crisis. Although the AGM had only recently directed its focus precisely on neoliberalism, its failure to expand beyond a small cadre of activists while at the same time key elements of its discourse were adopted by both business and the Obama administration’s aborted ‘Green New Deal’, resulted in the odd situation where the Tea Party became the most visible social movement responding to the crisis, which doubled down on neoliberalism with calls for even stricter austerity. This was the case until the relatively late emergence of the OWS movement, fully three years later. Since its dramatic arrival, OWS has renewed hope for a left political renaissance by challenging economic inequality and the neoliberal discourse that legitimated it, and has reintroduced long-forgotten words like ‘capitalism’ and ‘class’ back into political debates. Its critique of corporate power, repertoire of direct action and leaderless direct democracy, and radically pluralist ethos all directly build on the neoanarchist politics of the North American AGM. Indeed, many of the key activists who laid the initial groundwork for OWS — David Graeber, Marina Sitrin, Brooke Lehman, Lisa Fithian, David Solnit — are all veterans and co-founders of the major organization of the AGM, the DAN. These significant overlaps in political discourse, repertoire and personnel suggest that OWS is, in part, the AGM coming out of a period of what Verta Taylor (1989) calls ‘abeyance’, or movement hibernation. Yet, it has been reawakened by a radically changed political opportunity structure — a deep economic crisis, which has in turn mobilized new political actors and opened up previously closed avenues of political argumentation. Thus, I argue that OWS is a hybrid movement; it is the convergence of a populism animated by those directly hit by the economic crisis with previously existing neoanarchist activism now emerging from a period of relative inactivity.

Given this genealogy, it is unsurprising then that OWS is already confronting many of the same obstacles. Bound together by the simple yet rhetorically powerful frame of the 99%, this unitary populism exacerbates the same tendencies that contributed to its predecessor’s demise; will OWS share the AGM’s fate? The following section will explore some of the continuities and ruptures between these two movements, to argue that many of the same limitations that

demobilized the AGM persist in OWS today. These include a moral and personalized critique of neoliberalism narrowly focused on corporations, a rigid combination of consensus and pluralism that evacuates politics, and a problematic fusion of form and content that reduces the latter to the former.

## **Prefigurative politics: form as content**

Rejecting both major American parties and narrow demands, the OWS encampments instead sought to carve out space, both figuratively and literally, where a new form of politics could be practiced that modeled the radically democratic society desired. A key participant and theorist of both OWS and the AGM, anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, is a proponent of this view – often described as ‘prefigurative politics.’<sup>3</sup> Compare his 2002 *New Left Review* article on the politics of the AGM:

‘... this is a movement about reinventing democracy. It is not opposed to organization. It is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organization are its ideology. It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy.’

(Graeber 2002, 68)

with the basic political statement featured on the OWS website:

‘Occupy Wall Street is a leaderless resistance movement with people of many colors, genders and political persuasions. The one thing we all have in common is that We Are The 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%. We are using the revolutionary Arab Spring tactic to achieve our ends and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximize the safety of all participants.

This #ows movement empowers real people to create real change from the bottom up. We want to see a general assembly in every backyard, on every street corner because we don’t need Wall Street and we don’t need politicians to build a better society.’ (OWS website, <http://occupywallst.org/>, accessed December 2012)

Prefigurative politics, or what Graeber (2002, 68) has called ‘small-a anarchism’, is understood as a fundamentally practical politics – its ideology is immanently embedded and enacted in its directly democratic practices – participatory, ostensibly leaderless general assemblies characterized by consensus decision-making. Occupy’s definitional tactic – 24-hour encampments which symbolically hold public space – has made this strategic orientation even more central than its predecessors in the AGM. Yet the classical anarchist concern with consistency of means and ends has, in its neoanarchist form, evolved into their fusion: form becomes content, political goals become synonymous with and indistinguishable from movement form. This maneuver attempts to

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<sup>3</sup> Graeber has emerged as a leading intellectual and activist within the Occupy milieu, see Dan Berrit’s (2011) article. For an earlier statement of Graeber’s anarchism, see Graeber (2002).

circumvent the need for ideology, and the sectarianism and theoretical squabbles it entails, but also opens it up to the charge of harboring the equally problematic antior post-political tendencies described by agonistic thinkers like Chantal Mouffe (2000).

In the early days of OWS, discussion of contentious political questions had already proven to immediately shatter any consensus among the 99%, which further incentivized the reduction of politics to tactics. Thus the importance of maintaining the self-organized encampments: they neatly fill this ideological vacuum and suspend the need for further discussion; form — and the continuous demands of householding — stands in for and evacuates political content. Listening to the general assemblies held in Zuccotti Park, one hears little discussion of political vision, policy measures, the feasibility of socialism in one country or even the Tobin Tax. Instead, most discussion centers on the logistics of maintaining the occupation: feeding people, noise issues (one especially contentious example was whether or not to limit how long drum circles could play in Liberty Square), keeping warm and sleeping arrangements. As a result, general assemblies often had the character of rather long house meetings punctuated with political slogans. Frustration with perceived inefficiency of the length and efficiency of the Assemblies engendered high rates of attrition and burnout, and contributed to the short lifespan of the mobilization.

Occupy's Assemblies also pose a certain Arendtian paradox. On the one hand, they formally resemble the vision of council direct democracy championed by Arendt (1963) in *On Revolution*, the 'lost treasure' of the revolutionary tradition she hoped could reinvent politics. Yet on the other, the content of the general assemblies often narrowly focuses on matters of physical reproduction, how to house, feed and maintain the encampments. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958) describes this kind of repetitive necessary labor as *oikos*, which she theorized as the opposite of politics — the act of creating a social world in common extending beyond a mere collection of private needs. While Arendt's banishment of economics from the political realm is highly problematic, her distinction between private and public is nonetheless instructive when trying to understand prefigurative movements like OWS. It was precisely those instances which transcended the domesticity of localized encampments — taking the Brooklyn Bridge, the Oakland port closure — which had the greatest impact, by challenging public power and engaging in a shared enterprise of political will formation.

This paradox has resulted in a noticeable gulf between the sophisticated and concrete way daily logistical concerns are addressed, while broader questions of vision, goals and strategy remain highly abstract or ignored entirely. In this manner, OWS has reversed the classic political formula of goal → strategy → tactic, to tactic → strategy → goal. In this regard, neoanarchism follows squarely in the footsteps of the 'new social movement', which set themselves apart from earlier 'instrumental' movements by eschewing narrow goals in favor of cultural, qualitative and identity transformations (Buechler 1995). This trajectory of movement development has now come full circle to reach its apogee, with the rejection of political ideology in favor of prefigurative practices congealing into a new anti-ideological ideology — neoanarchism.

This inability to translate movement form into a broader strategy and social vision is also reflected in the evolution of protest organization names: Students for a Democratic Society was followed by the DAN and then OWS, shifting attention from the type of society desired to the tactics used to achieve an unstated goal. Anthropologist Jeffrey Juris has noted the problem of fetishizing form, stating 'It's critical to broaden tactics ... But how do you do that when the movement is called Occupy?' (Schuessler 2012). This insight recalls similar problems confronted by OWS' predecessor organization, the DAN. Despite a more widely shared anarchist politics

cultivated through a decade of activist experience, direct democracy was still primarily conceived as a tactic or set of practices rather than an alternative institutional order. The inability to move from direct action to social transformation was an important factor in movement decline.

Many have argued that the pluralistic populism of OWS has been a strength thus far, fostering movement growth through low-commitment participation through identification. However, questions of politics and strategy can only be deferred so long; a movement that does not move stagnates and dies. This allergy to confronting questions which would inevitably entail political disagreement and division was evident both in the contentious debate over issuing demands, as well as in the widespread hostility to perceived sectarianism, Marxist and anarchist alike. In this regard, OWS shares Arendt's valorization of natality, a belief in the transformative power of doing things for the first time, a position also highly skeptical of existing options, organizational or ideological. Yet there is no eliding the thicket of politics, and the questions OWS confront are not new – past movements, traditions and thinkers have amassed a great deal of pertinent knowledge which this bias towards novelty leaves largely unexplored.

As concrete goals and strategies are proposed, one would expect 'the 99%' to begin to subdivide according to divergent political inclinations. This ideological specialization happened towards the end of the New Left and also in the waning days of the AGM, when activists moved away from organizing based on a tactic or a particular summit towards building organizations based on political analysis and vision. This resulted in a flowering of groups congealed around different political foci, like the Northeast Federation of Anarcho-communists (class struggle), Bring the Ruckus (racism and white supremacy), Alliance for Freedom and Direct Democracy (direct democracy and ecology). Yet unlike the AGM, Occupy does not share the rough consensus on analysis and political vision forged during the decade of social movement activism, which led up to the 'Battle in Seattle' in 1999. Juris highlights this important difference between OWS and the AGM, stating, 'Occupy has been about aggregating large numbers of individuals who have never been active before ... But people who are easily aggregated, can also be easily disaggregated' (Schuessler 2012). Occupy Wall Street is broader and more politically heterogeneous, including pronounced right libertarian elements; one might therefore expect the political fragmentation to happen as fast as the mobilization.

## **Right to the city: tactics or politics?**

The conflation of tactics with strategy and vision is replicated on a spatial level; cities have been the locus of struggle for both OWS and the AGM. What united the movement in each instance, over time and geography, was a common repertoire of direct action aimed at shutting down a particular event, if not an entire city. The AGM was defined by mobilizations that became synonymous with the cities and dates they converged on: J18 in London and Eugene, N30 in Seattle, A16 in Washington, DC. As time went on, mobilizations were increasingly referred to via an activist shorthand that simply used the name of the city they took place in: Seattle, Quebec, Gothenburg, Genoa. The specific political potentialities posed by urban environments were made apparent early on. During the first major North American alterglobalization protest, 'The Battle in Seattle', police chased demonstrators from the downtown core into the dense residential and gay neighborhood of Capitol Hill. Against the backdrop of enforcing martial law and a curfew in liberal Seattle, bewildered residents with little notion of the WTO or neoliberal trade regimes

became movement sympathizers when the repression of dissent literally came to their doorsteps – many citizens were trapped inside their homes by tear gas, others attacked or arrested by police while simply trying to get home after work. This direct experience of police violence, sharpened by widespread media coverage of peaceful protestors being violently attacked by riot cops, quickly expanded the conflict beyond committed activists to residents who felt besieged in their own city (Cockburn and St Clair 2001). The close proximity of urban life made it difficult if not impossible for police and National Guard forces to distinguish between friend and enemy; indiscriminate and arbitrary law enforcement in turn undermined the legitimacy of the state and the WTO summit it was protecting. What began as a small group of radicals protesting rather arcane trade laws quickly became a struggle over who controls the city, manifest in the popular chant, ‘Whose Streets? Our Streets!’

More recent uprisings in locations as disparate as Turkey and Brazil have also underscored the important role and unique political properties of urban environments. In each case a relatively small, localized campaign launched by ecologists (Gezi Park) and transportation activists (Rio) quickly spiraled into massive uprisings that congealed into a united populace imbued with broad legitimacy arrayed against the state and its police forces. Much as the power of a bomb detonated in an enclosed area is increased exponentially, what might have been a routine political conflict was magnified by the enclosed urban environ, further multiplied via social networks, until the political scope of each mobilization had expanded from a single issue to, quite literally, the right to the city.

The difficulty of addressing the spatial dimension of protest in a world of dispersed global power was clearly reflected in one of the earliest and most important debates of the AGM. It centered on the efficacy and implicit privilege of ‘summit-hopping’, traveling from city to city for successive mobilizations, typically contrasted to community organizing based in one location addressed to local needs. From one side, ‘summit-hopping’ was a logical way to confront a globalized capitalism; from the other, this not only relied on racial and class privilege unavailable to most, but also ignored how the global impacted the local. Subsequent mobilizations tried to link global issues with local concerns, with varying degrees of success. However, other movement activists have observed that, in practice, the shift to ‘community organizing’ often meant abandoning radical critique in favor of providing necessary social services along with tighter relations with local government and businesses.<sup>4</sup>

Thinkers like Murray Bookchin (2007) and more recently David Harvey (2012) have suggested that a renewed urban politics might bridge this gap between tactics and politics, arguing that cities provide a locus for radical democracy beyond the ‘temporary autonomous zones’ of protest encampments or even general assemblies. They are concrete locations that spotlight whose ‘right’ to the city is taken seriously, and provide a visible public space for contesting the legitimacy of politics usually conducted at a remove from the populace. Political history from the Paris Commune to Tahrir Square suggests that cities represent a unique arena for the emergence of a democratic counterpower capable of transcending both the fleeting power of the street as well as authoritarian state institutions long shaped by the needs of the status quo. Despite this possibility, cities remain subject to many of the same threats faced by other forces of political contestation. Detroit was abandoned by industry despite desperate and conciliatory unions, while nearby Flint

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<sup>4</sup> This sentiment of a ‘loss’ of radicalism that accompanied the turn to community organizing was expressed in several interviews conducted with AGM activists in San Francisco and New York City, 2011.



was subjected to rule by unelected emergency financial managers in order to avoid bankruptcy (Harvey 2010, 229). Thus while cities can offer a platform ‘for envisioning, and indeed mobilizing towards, alternatives to capitalism’, that same spatialization also imposes constraints which a highly deterritorialized, mobile and digital – virtual capital can easily evade (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2009, 176).

## **Greed, the 99% and the personification of capitalism**

The OWS movement’s aversion to political theory or ideological coherence is especially crippling in the case of analyzing the complex economic problems it confronts. The ‘greed’ of the economic ‘1%’, counterpoised to the hardworking, rule-abiding 99%, has emerged as the dominant political frame of OWS. Rhetorically powerful, the slogan’s elegant simplicity conceals as much as it reveals. The language of ‘corruption’, the betrayal of Main Street by parasitic Wall Street bankers and nationalist appeals to ‘take America back’, all express a deep confusion as to whether the current crisis is in fact the exception or the rule. In this regard, OWS expresses affinities with the personalized view of capitalism within some strains of anarchism, where ‘propaganda by the deed’ meant assassination of heads of state and captains of industry.

Yet just as the state was not toppled by such symbolic beheadings, neither shall the power of Wall Street. While both are systemic, the ‘greedy capitalist’ is not the mirror image of the ‘corrupt politician’. In fact, as Weber ([1905] 1982) has famously pointed out, unlike in earlier epochs such as feudalism, capitalism has structural tendencies which actually *check* personal greed – for example, the need to constantly innovate and reinvest in the face of the eroding tides of intra-capitalist competition. The logic of states, embodied in politicians, armies and police forces wielding coercive external power, is quite different from the power of capitalism, mediated through abstract markets, impersonal money and mechanized cash registers. Conflating these two logics of power leads to very different political demands and outcomes.

Capitalist power acts not only or even primarily *on* subjects from outside, but *through* them, as worker and capitalist alike are caught up in an impersonal competitive imperative that would quickly bankrupt any turncoat bankers or CEOs who suddenly took the OWS message to heart. In this regard, the history of the cooperative movement is illustrative. Even for those examples that emerged from deep political commitments like the Mondragon cooperative in Spain, the result has been bankruptcy or increasing resemblance to a traditional firm, only without bosses to bear the blame (Kasimir 1996). Still enmeshed in the competitive pressures of a market economy, every social gain won by cooperatives – wages, benefits, time off – constitutes a competitive disadvantage against capitalist firms lacking such scruples. Stalled by the same problems posed by ‘socialism in one country’, the result is liquidation, or a more self-managed form of capitalism not so distant from the entrepreneurial dream of being one’s own boss. One need only look at the punishments delivered to heretics ranging from Mitterrand, through Greek socialists-turned austerity enforcers, up to the reaction of ‘the market’ to the recent election of François Hollande. Today, ‘autonomy’ from capitalism is even more impossible than autonomy from the state it has captured.

## From corporate critique to finance critique

Tellingly, activist ire today is no longer directed at the Starbucks and Niketowns which famously had their windows smashed in 1999. Rather, OWS has zeroed in on institutions of finance that produce nothing tangible that can be wrapped up in ethical packaging. Perhaps this will be the next frontier for the ‘new spirit’ of capitalism, but for now, housing bubbles and the gentrification that follows, betting on derivative futures and other forms of unbridled speculation are all easy targets for populist rage because they irreducibly exist to do nothing but make ever more money. The Wall Street versus Main Street frame expresses a preference for the ‘real’ economy of hard work and the production of useful things, which is counterpoised to a ‘parasitic’ world of banks and traders who shuffle other people’s money around in a global digital casino. Yet this discourse betrays a *ressentiment* passed off as anti-capitalism. It ignores the fact that small business owners are not immune to this logic, and must maximize profit by increasing sales, increasing worker productivity or lowering wages, the same as individual workers compete with their fellows for raises and better positions to improve their lot. It is not the competitive logic of capitalism that is challenged, but only its most obvious, odious and ‘abstract’ form, which is in reality inseparable from its ‘good’ manifestations.

In the absence of a systemic critique of capitalism, the US left often gets hopeful whenever class and economic inequality are broached in any form whatsoever, no matter how problematically. However, a vague constellation of populist themes and anti-banker sentiment coupled with skepticism towards the traditional left, theory and politics as such could just as easily be channeled in non-emancipatory responses to economic inequality. The explosive rise of Golden Dawn in Greece is a chilling reminder of the continuing danger of reactionary forms of anti-capitalism, ranging from various backward-looking communitarianisms, survivalism, to outright fascism. The atrophy of the left during 40 years of neoliberal hegemony, during which the very word capitalism disappeared from political discourse, has resulted in an uncritical optimism and historical amnesia of the potentially deeply reactionary forms such amorphous discontent might take. Some observers have noted worrisome parallels to anti-Semitism in left critiques which focus only on ‘disloyal’ bankers and an ‘unreal’ cosmopolitan consumer culture opposed to ‘authentic’ national communities and cultures (Arnold 2012; Ogman 2013). However, lacking the strong socialist or communist tradition found in Europe, critiques of capitalism in the USA have often taken nationalist and producerist forms (Wilentz 1984). Thus, this divergent political history results not in the anti-Semitic ‘socialism of fools’ August Bebel warned of, but instead simply a foolish socialism. Today, strong currents of anti-intellectualism, political pluralism, a preference for consensus and an aversion to ideological sectarianism maintain this state of affairs.

## The limits of prefigurative movements

Occupy Wall Street and the anti-globalization movement share many striking affinities; the AGM also targeted corporate power and saw its democratic political vision as emanating from its internal organizational structure and practices. However, what happened to this movement? Why did it take three years for an activist left response to the economic crisis?

I submit that the anti-globalization movement collapsed from the same problems that have plagued movements which fuse form and content to the point of inseparability. The fate of the

DAN, the organization at the heart of the last upsurge of radical activism, is instructive. Despite an explicit vision of anti-capitalist direct democracy, DAN's politics were fundamentally bound to a *tactic* — direct action coupled with a now familiar participatory process based on consensus decision-making. This tactical fixation blocked strategic considerations for generalizing their social vision beyond the confines of movement form. At the same time, movement critiques were successful in popularizing demand for a more ethical universe, a space then filled by recuperating those themes into a market for ethical consumption.

There is nothing novel in the first part of this equation of decline; three excellent texts have addressed the problems prefigurative movements have consistently succumbed to: Jo Freeman's ([1971] 2002) 'Tyranny of Structurelessness' on informal hierarchies in supposedly 'leaderless' movements, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution* by Barbara Epstein (1991) on the feminist peace/direct action wing of the New Social Movements of the 1970s/1980s and Andy Cornell's (2011) recent *Oppose and Propose* on the group Movement for a New Society in Philadelphia. Each chronicles the problems that confront ostensibly leaderless, directly democratic, prefigurative movements — the conflation of tactics and strategy, absence of formal organizational structures creating informal hierarchies, inability to expand into mass movements, the tendency towards lifestylism and burnout.

Despite these challenges, there are also promising developments. One is the broadening of the movement to include those without the time to physically occupy spaces, a tactic that has now all but disappeared. Subsequent marches and rallies have been large and diverse, including significant union involvement. The use of direct action has expanded to include contesting court hearings on foreclosure, as well as occupying homes to fight eviction — building on pre-existing campaigns like those by the Right to the City Alliance and the Miami Workers' Center. Another is the increased militancy and scope of action witnessed in Oakland. The closure of the ports and willingness to confront police violence there has moved beyond symbolic occupation to targeted disruption. Perhaps the most important contribution of OWS however, is that it has changed the political conversation, revealing a widely shared anger at deepening material inequality ignored and perpetuated by politics as usual in all quarters. Like the New Left and alterglobalization movements before it, OWS has opened up an important new space to discuss what the left wants and how to get it, in a reflexively self-aware manner tempered and enlivened by the context of lived movement experience. Presently eclipsed by much larger popular uprisings in other parts of the world, what movements like Occupy will do with the widespread anger they have tapped into still remains to be seen.

## Conclusion

To conclude, both capitalism and the left which confronts it have undergone important transformations in the last 20 years. The social movements of the 1990s culminating in the AGM popularized a moral critique of corporations accompanied by a discourse of ethical consumption and autonomy which mirrored some aspects of the very market ideology they opposed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these activists changed corporations, not the world. Today, business speaks the language of social movements, addressing ethical concerns while simultaneously insulating itself from critique. Those movements declined at the same time that their signature issues — ecology, labor, human rights — were commodified, incorporated into a newly emerging discourse of eth-

ical capitalism wherein consumers can vote with their dollars in a seemingly democratic and noncoercive market that claims to give people what they want, without the messy business of politics.

This process has been facilitated by the ascendance of a new political constellation, neoanarchism, which articulates a politics of autonomous pluralism that rejects not only the state but often power itself, privileging instead alternative institutions, the immediacy of prefigurative action and individual ethical choice. However, its discourse of autonomism rests on a reformulation of negative liberty, which shares strong ideological resonance with market pluralism, rendering it functionally compatible with the contemporary social order. Contemporary movements thus often unwittingly act as social entrepreneurs that offer not only ethical legitimation, but the very engine of a *new spirit of capitalism* where social problems are dealt with by enlightened consumption, and soul-deadening work is transformed into ‘meaningful’, flexible/parttime and self-directed project labor. Anarchist projects that primarily seek to carve out space from the state find a terrain already largely filled by corporations and NGOs, but increasingly given additional legitimacy by social movements. Yet despite the ubiquity of movement rhetoric — sustainability, participation, fairness — hypercompetition and austerity march on.

Occupy Wall Street has complicated this process, reviving the hibernating politics of the AGM while also introducing a materialist bent and massive popular base it lacked during the boom years of the 1990s and early 2000s. The structural adjustment abroad the AGM fought against has now come home to roost in the form of austerity. In turn, OWS has picked up where its predecessor left off, shifting critique from individual corporate brands to the arena of commerce least able to manufacture an ethical veneer, where the profit maximizing logic of capitalism is laid bare — finance, focused particularly on the twin pillars of homeowner and student debt. Although the target has changed, key elements of its inherited ideology and practice have not — making it vulnerable to the same factors which demobilized its forebears. Occupy’s populism exacerbates tendencies to avoid difficult political questions by dissolving politics into tactics.

Over the past 40 years, the left in the USA has too often reaffirmed the right-wing stereotype of primarily white, college-educated professionals telling working-class people to make do with less on behalf of a distant or abstract other. In a political landscape where the ‘left’ political pole has increasingly been defined solely by liberal social issues, the concerns of the working-class losers of the New Economy have been steadily marginalized when not abandoned altogether. While the AGM primarily spoke on behalf of Third World peasants, sea turtles and the environment, OWS is rooted in concrete conditions directly affecting millions — the same neoliberal forces activists protested a decade ago have returned with a vengeance. Despite a greatly expanded audience, and in the absence of a coherent critique and clear political alternatives such anger could easily dissipate when or if the economy turns around, or even be channeled into deeply reactionary directions far worse than neoliberalism. Whether this happens or not is contingent on the extent to which movements like OWS overcome the obstacles outlined above — amnesia of recent social movement history, an incomplete analysis of capitalism and fetishizing tactics over political strategy.

Today, neoanarchism is hegemonic on the North American radical left, even as its theoretical and practical shortcomings continue to frustrate its aspiration of fundamental social change. While modern left social movements have largely rejected older forms of parliamentarism, party-building or vanguard organizations that have proven exclusionary and ineffective in bringing about social change, the evolution of the movement tributaries that would become OWS also

suggests the need to reflect on the unique challenges and possibilities posed by these alternatives. Although the crisis has returned an angry materialism that has revived a potentially radical political subjectivity, a mode of popular power that transcends the limitations posed by both the state and the street has still yet to be found. Answering this challenge is perhaps the most pressing task confronting critical theory today; Occupy and the many other popular movements currently sweeping the globe bring this task to life by rendering it concrete, simultaneously reintroducing another important and long-dormant element — hope.

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Blair Taylor is a doctoral candidate in the Politics Department at the New School for Social Research and a fellow at the Einstein Institute Crisis Research Group at the Freie Universität Berlin.

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