

On playing by the rules

The strange success of #OccupyWallStreet

David Graeber

October 19, 2011

Just a few months ago, I wrote a piece for Adbusters that started with a conversation I'd had with an Egyptian activist friend named Dina:

All these years," she said, "we've been organizing marches, rallies... And if only 45 people show up, you're depressed, if you get 300, you're happy. Then one day, 200,000 people show up. And you're incredulous: on some level, even though you didn't realize it, you'd given up thinking that you could actually win.

As the Occupy Wall Street movement spreads across America, and even the world, I am suddenly beginning to understand a little of how she felt.

On August 2, I showed up at a 7 PM meeting at Bowling Green, that a Greek anarchist friend, who I'd met at a recent activist get together at 16 Beaver Street, had told me was meant to plan some kind of action on Wall Street in mid-September. At the time I was only vaguely aware of the background: that a month before, the Canadian magazine Adbusters had put out the call to "Occupy Wall Street", but had really just floated the idea on the internet, along with some very compelling graphics, to see if it would take hold; that a local anti-budget cut coalition top-heavy with NGOs, unions, and socialist groups had tried to take possession of the process and called for a "General Assembly" at Bowling Green. The title proved extremely misleading. When I arrived, I found the event had been effectively taken over by a veteran protest group called the Worker's World Party, most famous for having patched together ANSWER one of the two great anti-war coalitions, back in 2003. They had already set up their banners, megaphones, and were making speeches—after which, someone explained, they were planning on leading the 80-odd assembled people in a march past the Stock Exchange itself.

The usual reaction to this sort of thing is a kind of cynical, bitter resignation. "I wish they at least wouldn't advertise a 'General Assembly' if they're not actually going to hold one." Actually, I think I actually said that, or something slightly less polite, to one of the organizers, a disturbingly large man, who immediately remarked, "well, fine. Why don't you leave?"

But as I paced about the Green, I noticed something. To adopt activist parlance: this wasn't really a crowds of verticals—that is, the sort of people whose idea of political action is to march around with signs under the control of one or another top-down protest movement. They were

mostly pretty obviously horizontals: people more sympathetic with anarchist principles of organization, non-hierarchical forms of direct democracy, and direct action. I quickly spotted at least one Wobbly, a young Korean activist I remembered from some Food Not Bomb event, some college students wearing Zapatista paraphernalia, a Spanish couple who'd been involved with the indignados in Madrid... I found my Greek friends, an American I knew from street battles in Quebec during the Summit of the Americas in 2001, now turned labor organizer in Manhattan, a Japanese activist intellectual I'd known for years... My Greek friend looked at me and I looked at her and we both instantly realized the other was thinking the same thing: "Why are we so complacent? Why is it that every time we see something like this happening, we just mutter things and go home?" – though I think the way we put it was more like, "You know something? Fuck this shit. They advertised a general assembly. Let's hold one."

So we gathered up a few obvious horizontals and formed a circle, and tried to get everyone else to join us. Almost immediately people appeared from the main rally to disrupt it, calling us back with promises that a real democratic forum would soon break out on the podium. We complied. It didn't happen. My Greek friend made an impassioned speech and was effectively shooed off the stage. There were insults and vituperations. After about an hour of drama, we formed the circle again, and this time, almost everyone abandoned the rally and come over to our side. We created a decision-making process (we would operate by modified consensus) broke out into working groups (outreach, action, facilitation) and then reassembled to allow each group to report its collective decisions, and set up times for new meetings of both the smaller and larger groups. It was difficult to figure out what to do since we only had six weeks, not nearly enough time to plan a major action, let alone bus in the thousands of people that would be required to actually shut down Wall Street—and anyway we couldn't shut down Wall Street on the appointed day, since September 17, the day Adbusters had been advertising, was a Saturday. We also had no money of any kind.

Two days later, at the Outreach meeting we were brainstorming what to put on our first flyer. Adbusters' idea had been that we focus on "one key demand." This was a brilliant idea from a marketing perspective, but from an organizing perspective, it made no sense at all. We put that one aside almost immediately. There were much more fundamental questions to be hashed out. Like: who were we? Who did want to appeal to? Who did we represent? Someone—this time I remember quite clearly it was me, but I wouldn't be surprised if a half dozen others had equally strong memories of being the first to come up with it—suggested, "well, why not call ourselves 'the 99%'? If 1% of the population have ended up with all the benefits of the last 10 years of economic growth, control the wealth, own the politicians... why not just say we're everybody else?" The Spanish couple quickly began to lay out a "We Are the 99%" pamphlet, and we started brainstorming ways to print and distribute it for free.

Over the next few weeks a plan began to take shape. The core of the emerging group, which began to meet regularly in Tompkins Square park, were very young people who had cut their activist teeth on the Bloombergville encampment outside City Hall earlier in the summer; aside from that there was a smattering of activists who had been connected to the Global Justice movement with skills to share (one or two of whom I had to drag out of effective retirement), and, as mentioned a number of New Yorkers originally from Greece, Spain, even Tunisia, with knowledge and connections with those who were, or had been, involved in occupations there. We quickly decided that what we really wanted to do was something like had already been accomplished in Athens, Barcelona, or Madrid: occupy a public space to create a New York General

Assembly, a body that could act as a model of genuine, direct democracy to contrapose to the corrupt charade presented to us as “democracy” by the US government. The Wall Street action would be a stepping-stone. Still, it was almost impossible to predict what would really happen on the 17th. There were supposed to be 90,000 people following us on the internet. Adbusters had called for 20,000 to fill the streets. That obviously wasn’t going to happen. But how many would really show up? What’s more, we were keenly aware that the NYPD numbered close to 40,000; Wall Street was, in fact, probably the single most heavily policed public space on the face of Planet Earth. To be perfectly honest, as one of the old-timers scrambling to organize medical and legal trainings, lessons on how to organize affinity groups and do non-violent civil disobedience, seminars on how to facilitate meetings and the like, for most of us, the greatest concern during those hectic weeks was how to ensure the initial event wouldn’t turn out a total fiasco, with all the enthusiastic young people immediately beaten, arrested, and psychologically traumatized as the media, as usual, simply looked the other way.

We’d certainly seen it happen before.

This time it didn’t. True, there were all the predictable conflicts. Most of New York’s grumpier hard-core anarchists refused to join in, and mocked us from the sidelines as reformist; meanwhile, the more open, “small-a” anarchists, who had been largely responsible for organizing the facilitation and trainings, battled the verticals in the group to ensure that we did not institute anything that could become a formal leadership structure, such as police liaisons or marshals. There were also bitter battles over the web page, as well as minor crises over the participation of various fringe groups, ranging from followers of Lyndon LaRouche to one woman from a shadowy group that called itself US Day of Rage, and who we sometimes suspected might not have any other members, who systematically blocked any attempt to reach out to unions because she felt we should be able to attract dissident Tea Partiers. On September 17th itself, I was troubled at first by the fact that only a few hundred people seemed to have shown up. What’s more the spot we’d chosen for our General Assembly, a plaza outside Citibank, had been shut down by the city and surrounded by high fences. The tactical committee however had scouted out other possible locations, and distributed maps: around 3 PM, word went around we were moving to location #5—Zuccotti Park—and by the time we got there, I realized we were surrounded by at least two thousand people.

The real credit for what happened after that—within a matter of weeks, a movement that had spread to 800 different cities, with outpourings of support from radical opposition groups as far away as China—belongs mainly to the students and other young people who simply dug themselves and refused to leave, despite the endless (and in many cases, obviously illegal) acts of police repression designed to intimidate, and to make life so miserable in the park (refusing to allow activists to cover their computers with tarps during rainstorms, that sort of thing) that its inhabitants would simply become demoralized and abandon the project. And, as the weeks went on, against calculated acts of terrorism involving batons and pepper-spray. Still, dogged activists have held out heroically under such conditions before, and the world simply ignored them. Why didn’t it happen this time? After so many years of vain attempts to revive the fervor of the Global Justice Movement, and constantly falling flat, I found myself, like Dina, asking “what did we actually do right?”

My first take on the question came when The Guardian asked me to write an oped on Occupy Wall Street a few days later. At the time I was inspired mainly by what Marisa Holmes, another brilliant organizer of the original occupation, had discovered in her work as a video documentar-

ian, doing one-on-one interviews of fellow campers during the first two nights at Zucotti Square. Over and over she heard the same story: “I did everything I was supposed to! I worked hard, studied hard, got into college. Now I’m unemployed, with no prospects, and \$50 to \$80,000.00 in debt.” These were kids who played by the rules, and were rewarded by a future of constant harassment, of being told they were worthless deadbeats by agents of those very financial institutions who—after having spectacularly failed to play by the rules, and crashing the world economy as a result, were saved and coddled by the government in all the ways that ordinary Americans such as themselves, equally spectacularly, were not.

“We are watching,” I wrote, “the beginnings of the defiant self-assertion of a new generation of Americans, a generation who are looking forward to finishing their education with no jobs, no future, but still saddled with enormous and unforgivable debt.” Three weeks later, after watching more and more elements of mainstream America clamber on board, I think this is still true. In a way, the demographic base of OWS is about as far as one can get from that of the Tea Party—with which it is so often, and so confusingly, compared. The popular base of the Tea Party was always middle aged suburban white Republicans, most of middling economic means, anti-intellectual, terrified of social change—above all, for fear that what they saw as their one remaining buffer of privilege (basically, their whiteness) might finally be stripped away. OWS, by contrast, is at core forwards-looking youth movement, just a group of forward-looking people who have been stopped dead in their tracks; of mixed class backgrounds but with a significant element of working class origins; their one strongest common feature being a remarkably high level of education. It’s no coincidence that the epicenter of the Wall Street Occupation, and so many others, is an impromptu library: a library being not only a model of an alternative economy, where lending is from a communal pool, at 0% interest, and the currency being leant is knowledge, and the means to understanding.

In a way, this is nothing new. Revolutionary coalitions have always tended to consist of a kind of alliance between children of the professional classes who reject their parents’ values, and talented children of the popular classes who managed to win themselves a bourgeois education, only to discover that acquiring a bourgeois education does not actually mean one gets to become a member of the bourgeoisie. You see the pattern repeated over and over, in country after country: Chou Enlai meets Mao Tse Tung, or Che Guevara meets Fidel Castro. Even US counter-insurgency experts have long known the surest harbingers of revolutionary ferment in any country is the growth of a population of unemployed and impoverished college graduates: that is, young people bursting with energy, with plenty of time on their hands, every reason to be angry, and access to the entire history of radical thought. In the US, the depredations of the student loan system simply ensures such budding revolutionaries cannot fail to identify banks as their primary enemy, or to understand the role of the Federal Government—which maintains the student loan program, and ensures that their loans will be held over their heads forever, even in the event of bankruptcy—in maintaining the banking system’s ultimate control over every aspect of their future lives.

Ordinarily, though, the plight of the indebted college graduate would not be the sort of issue that would speak directly to the hearts of, say, members of New York City’s Transit Worker’s Union—which, at time of writing, is not only supporting the occupation, but suing the New York Police Department for commandeering their buses to conduct a mass arrest of OWS activists blocking the Brooklyn Bridge. Why would a protest by educated youth strike such a chord across America—in a way that it probably wouldn’t have in 1967, or even 1990? Clearly, it has

much to do with the financialization of capital. It may well be the case by now that most of Wall Street's profits are no longer to be being extracted indirectly, through the wage system, at all, but taken directly from the pockets of ordinary Americans. I say "may" because we don't really have the numbers. In a way this is telling in itself. For all the endless statistical data available on every aspect of our economic system, I have been unable to find any economist who can tell me how much of an average American's annual income, let alone life income, ends up being appropriated by the financial industries in the form of interest payments, fees, penalties, and service charges. Still, given the fact that interest payments alone takes up between 15–17% of household income,¹ a figure that does not include student loans, and that penalty fees on bank and credit card accounts can often double the amount one would otherwise pay, it would not be at all surprising if at least one dollar out of every five an American earns over the course of her lifetime is now likely to end up in Wall Street's coffers in one way or another. The percentage may well be approaching the amount the average American will pay in taxes. In fact, for the least affluent Americans, it has probably long since overtaken it.

This has very real implications for how we even think about what sort of economic system we are in. Back when I was in college, I learned that the difference between capitalism and feudalism—or what was sometimes called the "tributary mode of production"—is that a feudal aristocracy appropriates its wealth through "direct juro-political extraction." They simply take other people's things through legal means. Capitalism was supposed to be a bit more subtle.² Yet as soon as it achieved total world dominance, capitalism seems to have almost immediately begun shifting back into something that could well be described as feudalism.³ In doing so, too, it made the alliance of money and government impossible to ignore. In the years since 2008, we've seen examples ranging from the comical—as when loan collection agencies in Massachusetts sent their employees out en masse to canvas on behalf of a senate candidate (Scott Brown) who they assumed would be in favor of harsher laws against debtors, to the downright outrageous—as when "too big to fail" institutions like Bank of America, bailed out by the taxpayers, secure in the knowledge they would not be allowed to collapse no matter what their behavior, paying no taxes, but delivering vast sums of culled from their even vaster profits to legislators who then allow their lobbyists to actually write the legislation that is supposed to "regulate" them. At this point, it's not entirely clear why an institution like Bank of America should not, at this point, be considered part of the federal government, other than that it gets to keep its profits for itself.

Still, this might explain the outrage at government's alliance with the financial sector—the fact that bribery has, effectively, been made legal in America, a country that nonetheless presumes to go around the world pretending it is some sort of beacon of democracy. It does not explain the comprehensive rejection of existing political institutions of any sort.

This is where I must admit my own position is particularly confusing. On the one hand, this is exactly the kind of attitude I have been arguing for for years. I like to describe myself precisely as a "small-a anarchist." That is, I believe in anarchist principles—mutual aid, direct action, the idea

¹ www.federalreserve.gov.

² Similarly, Max Weber argued that the "irrational political capitalism" of "military adventurers ... tax farmers, speculators, money dealers, and others" of, say, the Roman world, was an historical dead end, since it was ultimately parasitical off the state, and had nothing in common with the rational investment of production of modern industrial capitalism. By Weber's logic, contemporary global capitalism, which is dominated by speculators, currency traders, and government contractors, has long since reverted to the dead-end irrational variety.

³ See attempter.wordpress.com for a nice essay on Occupy Wall Street and "neo-feudalism."

building the new, free society in the shell of the old—but I’ve never felt a need to declare allegiance to any particular anarchist school (Syndicalists, Platformists, etc). Above all, I am happy to work with anyone, whatever they call themselves, willing to work on anarchist principles—which in America today, has largely come to mean, a refusal to work with or through the government or other institutions which ultimately rely on the threat of force, and a dedication to horizontal democracy, to treating each other as we believe free men and women in a genuinely free society would treat each other. Even the commitment to direct action, so often confused with breaking windows or the like, really refers to the refusal of any politics of protest, that merely appeals to the authorities to behave differently, and the determination instead to act for oneself, and to do what one thinks is right, regardless of law and authority. Gandhi’s salt march, for example, is a classic example of direct action. So was squatting Zuccotti Park. It’s a public space; we were the public; the public shouldn’t have to ask permission to engage in peaceful political assembly in its own park; so we didn’t. By doing so we not only acted in the way we felt was right, we aimed to set an example to others: to begin to reclaim communal resources that have been appropriated for purposes of private profit to once again serve for communal use—as in a truly free society, they would be—and to set an example of what genuine communal use might actually be like. For those who desire to create a society based on the principle of human freedom, direct action is simply the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free.

Small-a anarchists such as myself were at the core of the anti-nuclear movement in the ‘70s and the global justice movement between 1998–2001, and over the years, we have put much of our creative energy into developing forms of egalitarian political process that actually work. I should emphasize that this is not just an anarchist project. Actually, the development of consensus process, which is probably the movement’s greatest accomplishment, emerges just as much from the tradition of radical feminism, and draws on spiritual traditions from Native American to Quakerism. This is where the whole exotic language of the movement comes from: facilitation, “the people’s microphone,” spokescouncils, blocks; though in the case of Occupy Wall Street, augmented and transformed by the experience of General Assembly movements across the Mediterranean.

Obviously, what happened is exactly what we hoped would happen. The politics of direct action is based, to a certain degree, on a faith that freedom is contagious. It is almost impossible to convince the average American that a truly democratic society would be possible. One can only show them. But the experience of actually watching a group of a thousand, or two thousand, people making collective decisions without a leadership structure, let alone that of thousands of people in the streets linking arms to holding their ground against a phalanx of armored riot cops, motivated only by principle and solidarity, can change one’s most fundamental assumptions about what politics, or for that matter, human life, could actually be like. Back in the days of the Global Justice movement we thought we might expose enough people, around the world, to these new forms of direct democracy, these traditions of direct action, that a new, global, democratic culture would begin to emerge. Of course it didn’t quite happen that way. Certainly, the movement did inspire thousands, and played a major role in transforming how activist groups in Europe and North America conducted meetings and thought about politics; but the contagion was largely contained within pre-existing activist ghettos; most Americans never even knew that direct democracy was so much of what we were about. The anti-war movements after 2003 mobilized hundreds of thousands, but they fell back on the old fashioned vertical politics of top-down coalitions, charismatic leaders, and marching around with signs. Many of us diehard kept

the faith. We kept looking for the moment of revival. After all, we had dedicated our lives to the principle that something like this would eventually happen. But, like my Egyptian friend, we had also, in a certain way, failed to notice that we'd stop really believing that we could actually win.

And then it happened. The last time I went back to Zuccotti Square, and watched middle aged construction workers and Latino hip hop artists using all our old hand signals in mass meetings, one of my old anarchist comrades—a one-time tree-sitter and inveterate eco-activist who used to go by the name Wacry, and was now established in the park as video documentarians—admitted to me, “every few hours I do have to pinch myself to make sure it isn't all a dream.”

So the social scientist in me has to ask: Why? Why now? Why did it actually work?

Again, I think the answer is generational. In politics, too, as in education, we are looking at a generation of young people who played by the rules, and have seen their efforts prove absolutely fruitless. We must remember that in 2008, the youth vote went overwhelmingly to Barack Obama and the Democrats. We also have to remember that Obama was running, then, as a candidate of “Change”, using a campaign language that drew liberally from that of radical social movements (“yes we can!”, “be the change!”), and that as a former community organizer, he was one of the few candidates in recent memory who could be said to have emerged from a social movement background rather than from smoke-filled rooms. This, combined with the fact that Obama was Black, gave young people a sense that they were experiencing a genuinely transformative moment in American politics.

All this happened in a country where there was such a straightjacket on acceptable political discourse in the US—what a politician or media pundit can say, without being immediately written off as lunatic fringe—that the views of very large segments of the American public simply are never voiced at all. To give a sense of how radical is the disconnect between acceptable opinion, and the actual feelings of American voters, consider a pair of polls conducted by Rasmussen, the first in December 2008, right after Obama was elected, the second in April 2011. A broad sampling of Americans were asked which economic system they preferred: capitalism, or socialism? In 2008, 15% felt the USA would be better off adopting a socialist system; now, three years later, the number has gone up, to one in five. Even more striking was the breakdown by age: the younger the respondent, the more likely they were to reject a capitalist system. Among Americans between 15 and 25, a thin plurality still preferred capitalism: 37%, as opposed to 33% in favor of socialism (the rest were unsure). But think about what this means here. It means that almost two thirds of America's youth think it might be a good idea to jettison the capitalist system entirely! This in a country where most have never seen a single politician, TV pundit, or mainstream “expert” use the term “socialism” as anything but a term of condescension and abuse. Granted, for that very reason, it's hard to know exactly what young people who say they prefer “socialism” actually think they're embracing. Presumably not an economic system modeled on that of North Korea. What then? Sweden? Canada? It's impossible to say. But in a way it's also beside the point. Most Americans might not be sure what socialism is supposed to be, but they do know a great deal about capitalism, and if “socialism” means anything to them, it means “something, pretty much anything, other than that!”

In 2008, young Americans preferred Obama to McCain by a rate 68% to 30⁴—again, an approximately 2/3 margin.

⁴ www.msnbc.msn.com

How, then, do you expect a young American voter to feel, after casting a vote for a fundamental change to our political and economic system, on discovering that in fact, they have elected a man who twenty years ago would have been considered a moderate conservative?

I mean that word, “conservative,” in its literal sense by the way. This literal sense is now rarely used. Nowadays, in the US, “conservative” has come to mean “right-wing radical,” but it used to mean someone whose main political imperative is to conserve existing institutions, more or less exactly as they are—and this is precisely what Obama has turned out to be. Almost all his greatest political efforts have been aimed in one way or another at preserving some institutional structure under threat of radical transformation: the banking system, the auto industry, even the health insurance industry, since Obama’s main argument in pushing for health care reform was that the US health care system, based on for-profit, private insurers, was not economically viable over the long term, and indeed, what he ended up doing was preserving exactly that for-profit system in a way that it might endure for at least another generation. Considering the state of the US economy in 2008, it required genuinely heroic efforts not to change anything. Yet Obama did expend those heroic efforts, and the result was no structural change in existing institutions of any kind at all.

I am a frequenter of the liberal blog Daily Kos. Reading it regularly is probably the best way to get a sense of what the “progressive community” in the US—left-leaning voters and activists who still believe in acting through the Democratic Party—are currently thinking. Over the last two years, the level of hatred directed against Obama is extraordinary. He is regularly accused of being a fraud, a liar, a secret Republican who has intentionally flubbed every opportunity for progressive change presented to him in the name of “bipartisan compromise” with a rabid and uncompromising Right. Others suggest he is a well-meaning progressive whose hands are tied; or, alternately, blame progressives for not having mobilized to provide sufficient pressure to his Left. The latter seem to forget the way the grassroots activist groups created during the campaign, which were expected to endure afterwards for just this purpose, were rapidly dismantled once Obama was in power and handing the economic reigns of the US over to the very people (Geithner, Bernanke, Summers) responsible for the crisis, or how liberal groups that actually try to mount campaigns against such policies are regularly threatened with defunding by White-House friendly NGOs. But in a way, this feeling of personal betrayal is pretty much inevitable. It is the only way of preserving the faith that it’s possible for progressive policies to be enacted in the US through electoral means. Because if Obama was not planning all along to betray his Progressive base, then one would be forced to conclude any such project is impossible. After all, how could there have been a more perfect alignment of the stars than happened in 2008? That year saw a wave election that left Democrats in control of both houses of congress,⁵ a Democratic president elected on a platform of “Change” coming to power at a moment of economic crisis so profound that radical measures of some sort were unavoidable, and at a time when popular rage against the nation’s financial elites was so intense that most Americans would have supported almost anything. If it was not possible to enact any real progressive policies or legislation at such a

⁵ The conventional response to this was to insist that the Democrats didn’t really control both houses because the Senate rules had changed, irresponsible use of the Filibuster meant that a 60-vote majority was required. This only makes sense if one assumes that any minority party, at any previous period of American history, could have gotten rid of majority rule and moved to a 60% system had they really wanted to, but somehow chose not to do so—which is obviously absurd. If the Republicans got away with it in 2008 it’s because the Democrats decided not to make a major issue an unprecedented opposition policy of systematically violating all previous tacit Senate rules.

moment, clearly, it would never be. Yet none were enacted.⁶ Instead Wall Street gained even greater control over the political process, and, since Republicans proved the only party willing to propose radical positions of any kind, the political center swung even further to the Right. Clearly, if progressive change was not possible through electoral means in 2008, it simply isn't going to be possible at all. And that is exactly what very large numbers of Americans appear to have concluded.

Say what you will about Americans, and one can say many things, this is a country of deeply democratic sensibilities. The idea that we are, or are supposed to be, a democratic society is at the very core of what makes us proud to be Americans. If Occupy Wall Street has spread to every city in America, it's because our financial overlords have brought us to such a pass that anarchists, pagan priestesses, and tree-sitters are about the only Americans left still holding out for the idea that a genuinely democratic society might be possible.

⁶ Obama's health care legislation, I will repeat, does not count since it is not comprehensive and effectively reproduces Bob Dole's Republican health plan of 2006.

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The mass popularity of the Wall Street occupation is almost uncanny — so where have the
protesters got it right?

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