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**Review of Mark Bray,
*Translating Anarchy: The
Anarchism of Occupy Wall
Street***

Gabriel Kuhn

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roughing it in the park, would there have been any need for organizing work, especially related to handling the media, at all? Who would have cared?

I imagine that, once upon a time, I would have wanted to rough it out in the park rather than talk to the media as well, and, admittedly, I might have gotten annoyed with people arriving well-rested in the morning speaking on my behalf. I am not saying that such a sentiment is justified, but I understand where it comes from and I think it indicates a tension that needs to be addressed rather than brushed aside. If we want to create a productive activist culture, the distinction between "organizers" and "participants" must either be overcome entirely, or it must be transparent and based on solidarity.

* * *

It is always unjust when reviewers focus on the few things they are uncertain or skeptical about instead of stressing all the aspects they agree with. Yet, it might also be inevitable if the aim is to advance our discussions.

I hope I was clear enough in my introductory comments: *Translating Anarchy* is an impressive example of movement analysis, one of the most important books about anarchism of its time, and a must read for anyone studying contemporary anarchism and its implications, challenges, and possibilities.

Gabriel Kuhn
(December 2013)

Mark Bray, Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street (Winchester/Washington: Zero Books, 2013). Mark Bray has written a response to this review, entitled "How Much is Lost in Translation?"

In *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street*, Mark Bray, himself an Occupy Wall Street (OWS) organizer for "almost the entire first year", especially in the "Press Working Group" (3), analyzes the anarchist implications of OWS and, specifically, the way in which anarchist politics were communicated. The analysis builds on his own experience and on interviews conducted with 192 other OWS organizers – in Bray's words, "the vast majority of the organizers that made Occupy Wall Street happen" (4) – between December 2011 and February 2013. The result is what Bray calls "the first comprehensive study of the politics of the movement's core organizers in New York City". (ibid.)

Bray's most important finding is "a significant political divide between a mass of mainly liberal supporters and an overwhelmingly anarchist and anarchistic core". (ibid.) Based on his interviews, Bray concludes that "39% of OWS organizers self-identified as anarchists and a further 33% had politics that were essentially anarchistic (anti-capitalist, antihierarchical, and direct action oriented) without using the label. That means that in total 72% of OWS organizers had explicitly anarchist or implicitly anarchistic politics." (ibid.) For Bray, the "most exciting aspect" of this was "the opening it provided for the mass dissemination of anarchist(ic) politics". (112)

Translating Anarchy is an important study of contemporary anarchism and of the activist milieu in general. This for several reasons:

1. It provides an extensive and detailed study of the Occupy phenomenon and dynamics in New York City.

2. Bray convincingly confirms that "anarchism ... has become the fastest growing and most dynamic radical ideology of the 21st century". (3)
3. Bray offers a persuasive approach to the definition of anarchism, considering its historical roots as well as its current forms. He declares that "our understanding of anarchism must not be so loose as to be meaningless, but not so rigid as to ignore areas of contradiction and historical transformation". (60) Resting his historical understanding of anarchism strongly on Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt's book *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, Bray manages to twist Schmidt and van der Walt's definition to make it both less narrow and static. This is an important contribution to the debate.
4. Bray's study is a serious and committed investigation into how anarchism can grow as a social movement.
5. Bray doesn't shy away from difficult subjects such as race dynamics in the anarchist milieu, subcultural tendencies, and what Bray calls "liberal libertarianism", which "rejects anything that smacks of coercion even when directed toward those who are actively working against the interests of the group". (91)
6. Bray's account revolves around tangible and inspiring quotes from organizers rather than dry and incomprehensible ones from academics.
7. The book is well-written, engaging, and, often enough, funny.

As Bray clearly states that "an important objective of this book is to clear up popular misunderstandings of anarchism and give new anarchists a broader understanding of the depth

In neoliberal capitalism, the individualization of our lives is so strong that for almost all of us individual life choices come first and collective organizing second (if it features at all). If we cannot solve this conundrum, that is, if we cannot break through the individualization and develop a strong sense of collectivity and a relevant activist culture, we can talk about revolutionary movements as much as we want without having any actual chance of forming any since we lack the most basic means to do so.

4. "Organizers" vs. "participants"

I would like to finish with an aspect that I wish Bray had explored more. It concerns the relationship between "participants" and "organizers" in social movements. With regard to OWS, Bray emphasizes the "distinction between organizers and participants" at least twice in his book. (3, 40) He also asserts that OWS was an "anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian movement run by organizers" (2), and that organizers "made Occupy Wall Street happen" (4). Interestingly enough, Bray never elaborates on this distinction, and it's not really clear what actually separates one identity from the other, or what the role of "participants" is at all. Let me use the following example to illustrate this: At one point, Bray talks about a fellow who chastised him for speaking to the media. Bray describes this fellow as someone who "who slept in the park but didn't seem to do much of anything else". (264) While I think I understand what Bray means, and while I assume that it wasn't the fellow's place to chastise Bray for doing press work, I still wonder about the "sleeping in the park but seemingly not doing much of anything else" bit. Bray himself suggests that he did not sleep in the park because it was rough and demanding and wouldn't have allowed him the rest he needed to do his organizing work. (ibid.) Yet, without people

3. Individualization

A personal aspect of Bray's account is, I believe, very telling. After an apt description of activists having developed "a passport stamp mentality oriented around the expectation that organizing is not about building long-term relationships and commitments, but rather about having a long string of diverse and interesting activist experiences to enrich their lives", Bray concedes that he himself didn't stick around when Occupy seemed to near its end because he "had to leave the country" (266); which, more concretely, meant that he was going "to spend a year in Spain doing academic research" (5). Now, it's important here not to be misunderstood: it is a very understandable choice to realize research plans that probably required much preparation, that might be essential for one's future plans, and that are quite likely a highly valuable experience in itself. I myself would probably be the first to jump on the opportunity. But that's exactly the problem: the fact that it seems ludicrous to expect any of us to give up a year of studying abroad to pursue revolutionary organizing indicates that we actually have very little trust in the latter. Even after an exhilarating experience such as OWS, it would seem ultra-naive, hyper-idealistic, or simply stupid to give up something of such high individual value. But if we really thought we could contribute to the revolution, would we then give up the chance of being part of it, at least if we are serious about being revolutionaries? The reality is this: practically all of us engage in "revolutionary" organizing as long as it fits our individual needs and trajectories, that is, if the time, the place, and the circumstances seem right. If they don't, we do something else. On this basis, however, there will never be a revolutionary movement, because for a movement to be revolutionary we need revolutionaries. This means dedicated militants for whom the revolution is not a fleeting idea but a lifelong dedication.

and diversity of the anarchist tradition" (7), it should not be surprising for seasoned anarchists if they are familiar with certain parts, like the explanation of anarchism's basic principles, or discussions on violence/nonviolence and the diversity of tactics. However, since these parts, too, are directly tied to OWS experiences, they make for interesting case studies even if you know the arguments.

Bray's study being so closely tied to Occupy is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that this should generate a fair amount of immediate interest. The curse is that this interest might wane with the seemingly fast disappearance of Occupy. But while some sections of the book are indeed strongly tied to specific historical moments (such as the reflections on Obama and voting or the lengthy descriptions of specific Occupy events), the overall analysis transcends these moments and is of lasting and general importance for anarchists of all camps.

For the remainder of the review, I'd like to focus on four aspects that I find particularly important.

1. Communicating anarchism

As the book's title suggests, one of its central themes is the "translation" of anarchism that occurred during Occupy. In Bray's words, this means "'translating anarchy' to people who were receptive to its contents but exceedingly wary of its usual linguistic packaging and popular rhetorical baggage". (113) Bray seemingly deemed such a translation necessary, because "if I had started off using the word 'anarchism,' many people would have tuned out right away". (ibid.) It was not just the word "anarchism" that Bray was concerned about, though. It was also his appearance, especially as an OWS press person: "I tried to be presentable by wearing khakis and a buttoned shirt. I'm not saying that we should all dress like businesspeople at

all, but it was useful for OWS to have some people playing the part of the straight-laced, 'average' person because, whether we like it or not, some people will only respond to that image of 'respectability.'" (301) This sentiment is also echoed by some of the other organizers interviewed in the book, one of whom wanted "to show people that normal people are anarchists" (161), while another enjoyed folks thinking that "this person is an anarchist but he's not the kind of anarchist I thought he would be" (157).

Bray summarizes this approach by saying that "many of us strategically articulated our politics to the media and the general public in order to present an accessible, mainstream image to make our revolutionary anti-capitalist politics more digestible". (4) As a result, "Occupy Wall Street became a vehicle for 'translating anarchy' to a society that was generally receptive to many anarchist ideas but wary of its ideological trappings". (ibid.) A particular success, in Bray's eyes, consisted of fooling the media: "They realized that there was a missing piece at the center of the Occupy puzzle, but made the mistake of assuming that it simply didn't exist. In truth, they didn't know what we wanted because we didn't tell them." (12) However, Bray also clarifies that "I'm not arguing that anarchists should never use the anarchist label. I'm simply pointing out that there are situations where the non-hierarchical, anti-oppressive, anti-capitalist ideas of anarchism might be better communicated without the label, at least to start." (126)

This all sounds very convincing. Yet, the counterargument appears obvious: if you make anarchism "more digestible" and prove to people that "normal" people can be anarchists, it might lead to better relationships with your family and glossy magazine articles expressing sympathy for your noble ideals, but you are not necessarily achieving anything in terms of social change. In the worst case, you're opening up a niche for anarchism as a cute, utopian, principled ideology that one can

Of course, none of this discredits Occupy – or similar uprisings. From the US to Spain to Turkey, people tell us that they have shaped a new generation of activists and laid the groundwork for future radical organizing. In Bray's words: "The fact that [during Occupy] the radical left in the United States has been so thoroughly imbued with anarchist practice, if not always anarchist politics, is an important step toward the long-term creation of a left libertarian mass movement. Though we may be scattered to the wind, I am confident that the dispersal of our anti-authoritarian ideas back across the country will provide the opportunity for them to plant the seeds of future resistance." (170) Bray also concurs with Ryan Harvey, who stated that "within political movements in the US, it is hard to imagine hierarchical organizing becoming popular among a generation that was brought into politics through Occupy". (260)

It is understandable that anarchists get excited about such prospects, even when it seems equally possible that *no* kind of revolutionary organizing will ever be possible under such premises, nonhierarchical ones included. In fact, this might be the crucial point: yes, Occupy and similar movements might have done *something* to make revolutionary movements possible, but that still doesn't make such movements fall from the sky. It is without doubt encouraging that Occupy "managed to tarnish the seemingly invincible allure of the American economic and political elite and broadcast inklings of an alternative" (9), but materializing the alternative is different from "broadcasting inklings of it"; and it is what really counts. In short, to really turn the Occupy potential into something long-lasting, plenty more is needed; most of all, the invisible, tedious, and unsexy everyday work of revolutionary organizing that doesn't attract journalists like flies.

ical restrictions”, and that’s all honorable, but help build strong movements it does not.

This might be the strongest argument for propagating the term ”anarchism” without restriction – at least, if we indeed want to build a strong movement around it. And if we think that this is not possible, then maybe that’s an indication for us not really trusting the name to begin with, in which case we should probably simply invent a new term, and possibly a new revolutionary language altogether. However, establishing a new term (and possibly a new revolutionary language altogether) might be an even harder task than ridding the term ”anarchism” of the common misconceptions. Questions over questions and, unfortunately, no answers – or, at least, not in this text.

2. Movement building

It has been a common explanation for the quick demise of the Occupy movement and similar public uprisings worldwide that they lacked the organizational structures to carry them further. Quite a few anarchists scoff at such arguments, but I think they are often correct. So does apparently Bray, at least with respect to the US: ”Part of my argument in this book is that in order for American anarchism to continue its recent growth and make serious inroads in the struggles of the oppressed it needs to get bigger organizationally”. (53-54) Bray adds that we also need to ”situate our tactics within a larger revolutionary strategy”. (247) He states: ”If we’re serious about building a powerful anarchist movement, then we need to create more alternative institutions and groups that can bring people in and give them an outlet to continue their revolutionary political engagement after the tents come down and the fingers stop wiggling. Because if we don’t, most people will understandably just continue to go about their business.” (262)

engage in – philosophically or practically – in order to feel better, escape existential boredom, or experiment with radical chic. In the process, anarchism might easily lose its special characteristics. And this is not just a possible future scenario. There are several anarchist groups in Europe who, in recent years, have spoken of leaving the ”anarchist ghetto”, making anarchism more attractive for the ”average person”, and help anarchism ”grow up”. Despite the often problematic language, the intentions are laudable. However, if you look at some of the journals that these groups bring out today, I don’t really know what makes them anarchist; they look and read like any lefty-liberal rag.

I assume that Bray is well aware of this danger and simply feels that it was avoided in the context of Occupy. At least that’s what his confident conclusion that ”it was strategically useful to refrain from talking openly about anarchism” seems to convey. (266) Now, Bray certainly knows better than I how this played out in North America. In Europe, however, Occupy was plagued from the start by conspiracy theorists, new age wackos, and anti-Semites. It might indeed be worth investigating whether this had anything to do with the anarchist message having been, well, ”lost in translation”, at least once physical distance and language barriers were added to the media’s mediation.

Bray makes an intriguing argument, though, about how things developed in the US: ”...the interesting relationship that I noticed in my interviews was that a large percentage of the anarchist organizers who were comfortable speaking openly about ’anarchism’ to the press or people on the street did so because they felt like OWS had opened a space for the legitimate use of the label. But that space for an explicit discussion of ’anarchism’ was opened by the mass popularity and success of OWS horizontalism, which developed, in part, because many of us refrained from labeling ourselves or the movement as ’anarchist.’ Leading with the ideas allowed the label to follow

for many anarchist organizers.” (160-161) Unfortunately, it seems impossible to say how a more open and self-confident usage of the term ”anarchism” might have changed the public perception of Occupy. It appears as if once organizers (or at least some of them) felt more comfortable using the term, Occupy was already on its way out. It might also be worth nothing that Bray’s argument is slightly reminiscent of the infamous Trotskyist tradition of establishing front campaigns: you don’t say what you are about before activists are so deeply involved in your campaign that it’s hard for them to leave.

I’m being facetious, of course. I’m certain that Bray doesn’t fantasize about front campaigns or anarchist adaptations of Trotskyist shenanigans. Yet, I’m still not sure if keeping anarchism hidden, or trying to make it appear respectable, is indeed the right approach. And this is not because I feel attached to a pseudo-revolutionary identity, compulsive self-marginalization, or purer-than-thou haughtiness – I am as critical of such tendencies as the next comrade. Yet, I can’t help thinking that for people to become revolutionaries they must be convinced by revolutionary politics and not by some down-tuned version of it. I understand that there might be beneficial short-term effects in appearing less radical (which, for example, might make it perfectly reasonable to abstain from potentially counterproductive labels in single-issue campaign), but what are the long-term effects? After all, we are not being honest, and people might never get the truth or they will turn away when they do. And what are we left with then?

The following might be a far-fetched example, but it shows a different reasoning. For the past fifteen years, Austria’s second-biggest city Graz has been experiencing an interesting electoral phenomenon. The Austrian Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Österreichs*, KPÖ) has received up to 20% in local elections, while it receives less than 1% nationwide. The reasons for the party’s success in Graz are manifold, and

this is not the place to dig into them (although I can say that they are tied to charismatic leadership, committed social work, and transparency), but I want to address the ”name question”: over and over again, KPÖ officials in Graz have been asked whether they wouldn’t be even stronger if they shed the unfortunate label of ”communism”. Their answers are usually very clear: 1. We are communists, why should we claim to be anything different? 2. The apparently negative connotation of the name is overrated: when your politics are good, people will support you. 3. The party has a proud history, which needs to be honored (they mainly mean the role of the KPÖ in the resistance against the Nazis, not its uncritical support of the Soviet Union). I do indeed wonder if this straightforward and self-confident approach isn’t one that anarchists should take as well.

I also wonder about the effects for both Occupy and anarchism had the connection between the two been more explicit from the beginning. Would it have weakened Occupy (as many people wouldn’t have wanted to be associated with anarchism) but strengthened anarchism (as anarchist politics would have had a clearer profile)? Would it have weakened Occupy (for the said reasons) *and* weakened anarchism (because anarchism profited from Occupy being strong, no matter whether the anarchist dimensions were explicit or not)? Or would it have strengthened anarchism (for the said reasons) *and* strengthened Occupy (because Occupy would have developed a clearer political profile as well)? Of course, we will never know, as historical experiments can’t be repeated, but I think it’s important to consider these questions in our final analysis.

There is at least one thing I believe we cannot deny, namely that labels are important for the building of social movements. The ”communist threat” would have never been a threat had it not been for millions of people across the world rallying under that name. I know that it has become popular in postmodern times to celebrate the multitude and to shy away from ”ideolog-