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Occupied Wall Street

Some Tactical Thoughts

Malcolm Harris

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I've been to the encampment at Zuccotti Park a few times since the 17th, but I have never stayed that long. It's not just cause I'd rather sleep in my room in Brooklyn on which I spend the vast majority of my income, but because I'm just not that into it. Yet I've met some great folks and I really do believe in the intentions of the vast majority of non-undercover non-Party attendees, so these notes are to them in hopes that we might advance the struggle together. When I was leaving the Park a few days ago, I heard someone in an assembly tell the audience: "We've won just by being here!" and she was met with uncontested applause. Sleeping on the sidewalk is not a victory unless you're first in line for concert tickets. Sleeping on the ground of a small decorative park owned by a commercial real estate firm is not a victory unless you are attempting to protect an endangered squirrel or a really old tree, and probably not even then.

Meanwhile, the ring of police officers surrounding the park earn time-and-a-half, stroking their batons, waiting. I've seen far fewer cops disperse much larger groups of better trained and prepared demonstrators in a matter of minutes, as has almost anyone who

protested against the Iraq War; the notion that we have won control of the park through the strength numbers is absurd. Meanwhile the police go on with the farce of instructions from “the space’s owner” as if there were a guy standing in an officer tower watching the park and changing his mind back and forth. It’s a tactic, and one we ought generally ignore. Look around. See the group with guns and sticks? They’re calling the shots. A friend remarked that if aliens showed up on the scene, they would think they had stumbled onto a police holding pen.

It seems to me that the tactic of an occupation has two main goals, neither of which the Zuccotti Park encampment is achieving. The first would be some sort of sabotage or interference that halts business as usual. When you hear “occupy Wall Street,” you don’t think Soviet tanks rolling into Prague, but there’s a suggestion of interruption. We want to occupy Wall Street because we want to make them stop what they’re doing. Camping in a park outside their office isn’t how you make them stop, it’s how you ask them to prom if you’re creepy about it.¹ It’s not like we’re even costing any CEO his beauty sleep “HeyHeyLBJ”-style. They all go home at night. When you walk to the encampment, it’s hard to realize anything’s happening until you get up and inside. It is painfully clear that the people who work there could not give a fuck. Wall Street’s crisis-business goes on as usual, under “occupation” or not.

The second function of an occupation would be a kind of collective enjoyment or gain at your enemy’s expense. His stuff becomes your stuff, which you get to play with and put to use. A park could be useful in this way as a staging ground for other actions and a liberated space participants can enjoy. As the snake-march to Union Square (with an arrest rate between 10 and 30 percent) demonstrated, a spot that’s surrounded by cops is probably not the best place to plan the specifics of your next action. I’m not being para-

¹ I swear this is a plot point in a movie or tv show, but I can’t remember which one. Remind me in comments and get your name here!

groups of people at the occupation who are ready to move beyond its current bounds, it's on the edges of the large circles. Maybe it's time the whole thing got edgier. That is, sharper.

See you in the streets.

noid or even controversial in pointing out that police officers are working inside and outside the bounds of the occupation. Sorry, but that buff 30-something guy with sunglasses, three Blackberries, and no friends isn't there because he saw the Olbermann feature on Current. There's no security and no attempt to keep anyone out of the park, which I understand, but people should be aware that plans made in this supposedly occupied place go straight to the police, if they weren't suggested in general assemblies by cops in the first place. So it's not a very good staging ground for a next wave of actions, it does not perform that function as a strategic resource.

As for the enjoyment, I guess that's a subjective question, but it was hardly a raucous party. Mostly people didn't want to "give the cops a reason" by enjoying themselves too publicly. If you thought passing around a bottle of whiskey was tough in your parents' basement in high school, try doing it under the watchful eye of dozens of New York's finest. I mean, we did, and it was kind of fun, but not like temporary autonomous zone fun. As I'm writing this, I'm seeing reports on Twitter of a cop-enforced quiet time after 10. It makes me wonder if they haven't let the whole thing go on this long as a way to get some austerity-hit officers overtime pay.

The fuzzy ultra-left ideal about forging new kinds of relationships through struggle and finding each other and such can't just be about meeting in space and time, otherwise we could start a bowling league and be done with it. If we're trying to learn how to have each other's backs, how to trust and depend on each other moving forward, then we need to put ourselves in situations that demand that kind of strength and solidarity.² And I don't mean taking people's sides in arguments over assembly process. That shit is dumb.

² This also means doing it the smart way. When I expressed surprise to a longtime New Yorker that the Union Square march resulted in so many arrests, he told me everyone knows the NYPD doesn't play above 14th Street while the UN is in session. I did not know that, and I would wager some of those arrested didn't either.

I don't want to quibble about whether or not the encampment counts as a "real occupation" — you can occupy a bathroom, but that doesn't mean you're doing shit. It seems clear to me that the encampment at Zuccotti Park isn't providing the benefits a successful tactical occupation could and should. That said, there are definitely some bright spots. First of all, the occupation has accumulated (last time I heard) \$24,000 in a war chest, along with literally tons of donated food. It looks like the national climate is such that an action of this ideological orientation can attract financial support, which is going to be huge, especially considering the costs associated with the criminalization of protest. When a brutal cop maced a couple women just for kicks, some anonymous³ internet folks posted a good bit of his personal information online. If there are direct personal consequences for particular aggressive cops, that can only be a good thing. For the first time it looks like people on the interwebs can help protect people on the ground. It seems to me they could do more. For example: I, for one, if the webs are listening, am interested in learning more about the owners of Zuccotti Park. These are elements of an emergent potential, the question remains what we can do with it.

Here are some ideas:

- The GA/consensus model doesn't exactly encourage creativity and is particularly susceptible to police co-optation. In one of the most heavily policed places in the world, where the NYPD is bragging about its ability to shoot down planes, we should assume they have a Che t-shirt and a Chrome messenger bag in a prop room somewhere. If anyone can lead the group, that means anyone can lead the group. A switch to a model based on smaller bands of people (5–10) who know and trust each other and have found common ground and operate in (naturally) overlapping ways would have the dual benefits of enabling creative rather than agreeable actions

³ It's an adjective, not a Party.

and reducing the risk of police infiltration, without forfeiting the benefits of a large group. The technical term for these crews is "affinity groups," but I prefer "friends."

- If the population of the park can grow past its boundaries and start threatening the normal functioning of Wall Street, then it could open up space for smaller groups to operate without too much police attention and change the balance of power in the park. I heard unconfirmed reports that Radiohead is planning a concert at the occupation this week, which if true could make it uncontrollable and attract more folks to a relatively uninhabited part of the city. I'm disinclined to believe the rumors, but you never know, and it's not like they can't afford to bail themselves out of jail. Maybe they could be cajoled over Twitter to show up and play a few acoustic songs. Either way, it doesn't make sense to me to try and protect the occupation from this kind of influx of people, even if that would make it untenable in its current form.
- This is a marathon, not a sprint or a hamster wheel. The next year is going to be explosive: the two Parties will spend a billion each reminding Americans how terrible everything is, and hoping they can get away with blaming each other for a permanent unemployment crisis. The social ills that brought people out aren't getting better any time soon. Occupy Wall Street is part of a sequence, not the sequence itself, and we should be thinking about its role in a revolutionary campaign of a longer but bound duration.
- If corporations are people, what would it mean to wrap our hands around one's neck and choke it to death?

These are admittedly preliminary thoughts, and I want to discuss what to do with other folks, but I don't want to address an assembly, and not just for security reasons. When I've found people and