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Horizontalism and the Occupy Movements

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This essay puts forward the basic premises around which the Occupy movements in the United States are organized, locates the movement globally, argues that the movements themselves are the ones that should determine their own success, and then distinguishes these positions from those that Michael Kazin puts forward in his article, “The Fall and Rise of the U.S. Populist Left.”

Kazin argues that the way to determine if the Occupy movements will be successful is if they articulate “what a better country would look like and what it would take to get there.” This, however, is the wrong way to evaluate the Occupy movements. The intention of the thousands of assemblies taking place around the United States, as well as in Greece and Spain, where I have been most recently, is to open spaces for people to voice their concerns and desires—and to do so in a directly democratic way. These movements emerged in response to a growing crisis, the heart of which is a lack of democracy. People do not feel represented by the governments that claim to speak in their name. The Occupy movements are not based on creating either a program or a political party that

will put forward a plan for others to follow. Their purpose is not to determine “the” path that a particular country should take but to create the space for a conversation in which all can participate and in which all can determine together what the future should look like. At the same time, these movements are attempting to prefigure that future society in their present social relationships.

The Occupy movements throughout the United States, Spain, and Greece all have sought to use direct democracy to create horizontal, nonhierarchical social relationships that would allow participants to openly engage with each other. The term “horizontalism,” from the Spanish *horizontalidad*, was first used in Argentina after the 2001 popular rebellion there. In what we can now see was a dress rehearsal for the current global movements, Argentines, during an economic crisis, went out into the streets by the hundreds of thousands. Banging pots and pans (*cacerolado*) and serenading officials with “*Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo*” (“They all must go, not even one should remain”), the protesters forced out five consecutive governments. In the process, they formed the first neighborhood assemblies grounded in *horizontalidad*, a word that had not been used previously. Movement participants described *horizontalidad* as the most natural way to listen and to connect to one another. They rejected representative democracy and the empowerment of leaders that such delegation of authority entailed, for this kind of politics was thought to have caused the crisis in the first place. The spirit of *horizontalidad* simultaneously emerged in workplaces and movements of the unemployed and then into the fabric of countless social relationships, where it was seen as a tool to create more participatory and freer spaces for all—a process of awakening and empowerment similar to that which Eduardo Galeano portrays as occurring in Utopia. *Horizontalidad* has since become a word and expression used throughout the world to describe social movements seeking self-management, autonomy and direct democracy.

IN ADDITION to cultivating *horizontalidad*, Occupy movements have also created new territories in which forms of direct democracy can flourish. The alternative structures and actions of the Occupy movement have emerged in these new geographic spaces of assembly. Here basic necessities, such as food, legal support, and medical care are coordinated. Novel actions have included the occupation of homes in the United States to prevent evictions and of cash offices in hospitals in Greece so people do not have to pay the newly imposed cost of health care. Towns and cities across the United States have created barter networks, generated alternative adjudication processes, and instituted free childcare. I know of one village in Northern California where people are using an alternative currency and another town outside Albany, N.Y., that has set up a free medical clinic. This is all self-organized horizontally.

THE POINT of reference of the movements is not the state or politics conventionally defined. There is no desire to take over the state or to create a new party. The Occupy movements reject this form of representative politics, focusing instead on people taking control of their own lives and expanding the democratic spaces in which they live and work. The fact that the movements do not have the conquest of the state as their goal does not mean they do not want countless things changed. To the contrary, they want the power of corporations contained and even broken, access to housing and education expanded, and austerity programs and war ended. But democracy is the crux of Occupy politics, and democracy practiced in such a way so as to upend vertical political relationships and expand horizontal ones. From these new forms of horizontal relationships, located in neighborhoods, villages, workplaces, and schools, and giving rise to novel forms of direct action, the Occupy movements will continue to grow. The question for the future is not how to create a plan for what a better country will look like, but how to deepen and broaden the assemblies taking place and how to enhance participatory democracy in the process.

Upon what does Kazin base his argument that the Occupy movements so far have not succeeded or are in the process of fading away? The declining number of physical occupations? The mainstream media covering the movements less? Differences in the visions of the participants? A comparison with a movement that has profoundly different objectives? Many within the Occupy movement, as well as the participants with whom I have spoken in Greece and Spain, believe that they have succeeded in important ways: in changing national and global political discourses; in making concrete changes in individual lives; in restoring power to social movements from below; and perhaps most important, in allowing people to feel that society and the world can be different and that their agency can make that happen.

The Occupy movements have made democracy a live question. People have not felt represented in the “democracies” in which they live, and they have exposed the connection of governments to corporations. People around the world say, in our many languages, “We have woken up” and “We will not be put back to sleep.” Success, I believe, has to be decided by those people in struggle, those who are organizing for their own goals and dreams. And from this perspective, while there are many challenges ahead, the Occupy movements have been and will continue to be successful.