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from the Barcelona Neighborhood Assemblies
14 October 2011

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# Reflections for the US Occupy Movement

**from the Barcelona Neighborhood Assemblies**

Peter Gelderloos

14 October 2011

In this respect, people in the United States have a great advantage over those in Barcelona. The Spanish state has experienced democracy for less than forty years, and the transition from dictatorship was a clear case of shuffling the cards, with fascists becoming conservatives and the Socialists being allowed into government as long as they didn't try to change the ground rules inherited from the earlier system. Historically speaking, it's an easy mistake for people here to make, calling for a "real" democracy as though their own were somehow false, or any different from any other democracy anywhere else on the planet.

The United States is the oldest continuous democracy on the planet. People there have no excuse for misunderstanding the nature of democracy. In fact, among the apolitical majority, there may well be a greater contempt for politicians and for government in general than in most other countries. The welfare states of northern Europe, for example, have successfully undermined popular autonomy and created a population of dependents and sycophants that, even today, in the face of growing abuse and governmental fascism, seem unable to constitute popular struggles. This innate American antiauthoritarianism, though it tends to remain in self-destructive or inert forms, could transform into an important ingredient for popular struggles.

In general, people in the United States face severe disadvantages in fighting power. The popular struggles of past generations were brutally crushed and critical lessons were not passed on. People have to start from scratch in a society constructed to meet the needs of money. In part because of this, people in the US have a unique opportunity to influence struggles worldwide, should they overcome the obstacles and turn these protests into something powerful. One thing is for sure: in the neighborhood assemblies in Barcelona, people have been whispering to each other, "Now, there's even occupations starting in the US. Something really big must be happening!"



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Meanwhile, the cities that held on to a democratic ideology quickly wasted their energies. This should not be a surprise. Movements that hope to bring together fascists and immigrants, that hope to inspire people by drafting petitions to their leaders, that ask us to respect the laws created by those who rule us, that underwrite the police's monopoly on force, that insist on an artificial unity maintained by interminable, process-heavy and easily manipulated meetings rather than trusting the intelligence of decentralization and people's own ability for self-organization, are destined to fail.

While we must be increasingly communicative to overcome social isolation, populism should be shunned like the plague. We do ourselves no favor by dumbing down our analysis, while we do make strategic errors more likely. Not only is populism counterproductive, it can be dangerous as well. At a peak of the global anticapitalist struggle in the 1920s, fascism appeared within the belly of the movement. Although fascism is identified as a rightwing phenomenon, it began with an anticapitalist rhetoric that blamed an obscure, elite minority for robbing "the nation," and it recruited heavily from within workers' movements. The bosses quickly supported the new fascist movement, giving it protection and resources, as an effective way to neutralize revolutionary struggles. The pro-democracy movement prevents the worst of fascism by promoting tolerance, but in many places it has already won the financing of forward-looking elites, hijacked growing struggles and steered them in populist, self-defeating directions, and marginalized more radical elements, directly assisting in their repression.

From the very origins of the democratic concept, "rule by the people" has always been a way to increase participation in the project of government, and "the people" have always excluded classes of slaves and foreigners, whether inside or outside of national boundaries. The question of freedom lies not in who rules, but whether anyone is ruled, or whether all are self-organizing.

In the assemblies we look for ways to take action ourselves. What could be more tedious than sitting through a two hour meeting where we're counselled to follow rules stacked against us, perhaps sign a petition or two, come out to a protest, provided we behave a certain way, and then leave the rest to the specialists? If someone had gotten up to speak of the need to be nonviolent or respect the laws, they probably would have been booed or ignored as a simpleton. If someone had spoken in favor of negotiating with the politicians or supporting a political party, they might have been kicked out.

The fact of the matter is, the neighborhood assemblies are not open to everyone. They are not spaces for fascists, for politicians, for journalists (at least in the case of some neighborhoods), or for bosses. They are places for building a struggle against capitalism, among those of us who are angry and who respect the principle of solidarity. As such, they fly in the face of democratic fundamentals such as equal rights, free speech, and universal participation. As much as the ideologues of direct democracy try to hide the conflict between the notion of rights and the ideal of freedom, there's no getting around this fact. The principles of democracy were drafted by elites interested in mediating class conflict and allowing the preservation of a class society. A struggle, to challenge the foundations of this system, must be antidemocratic.

While the alternative media have generally taken a cue from the 15M movement's self-appointed leaders and described it, in the words of these leaders, as a movement for "real democracy now," the chants in the protests and the comments in the assemblies leave no doubt—at least in Barcelona, where this movement is strongest—people are increasingly abandoning the concept of democracy and moving towards a growing anticapitalist consensus. There is still plenty of democratic rhetoric in the movement, but every month it seems to wane, and in the most active, dynamic neighborhoods, the common ground is not support of democracy but the shared opposition to capitalism.



*Before the Spanish call-out for a global day of action on October 15, a few critical notes and words of encouragement from the Barcelona neighborhood assemblies…*

After the courageous revolts of the Arab Spring, the next phenomenon of popular resistance to capture the world media's attention was the plaza occupation movement that spread across Spain starting on the 15th of May (15M). Subsequently, attention turned back to Greece, and now to the public occupations spreading across the US, inspired by the Wall Street protests.

The function of the media is to explain interruptions in the dominant narrative, not to spread lessons useful to the social struggles that generate those ruptures. As such, it is no surprise that they respond to the strategically important moments before and after these mass gatherings with a news blackout.

While the central plazas of the cities of Spain are no longer occupied, in some places the momentum of May continues with force. Particularly in Barcelona, a dynamic struggle continues to evolve, including a heterogeneous and broad group of people in weekly neighborhood assemblies, protests, hospital occupations, road blockades, fights against mortgage evictions and housing repossessions, and solidarity demonstrations against the inevitable repression.

The neighborhood assemblies in particular form a strong backbone that holds up all the ongoing struggles. In about twenty neighborhoods throughout Barcelona, once a week, twenty to a hundred neighbors meet to discuss their problems, propose actions, and share news. Each assembly has a different structure, and members of each assembly gather periodically to share and coordinate between neighborhoods. Half a dozen neighborhoods had assemblies before May 15, and a couple assemblies even predate the September 2010 general strike, but the participation in these assemblies exploded after the beginning of the plaza occupations, and over a dozen new neighborhoods formed assemblies of their own.

These neighborhood assemblies are changing the face of the struggle in Barcelona, overcoming the isolation and separation of the various, pre-existing political ghettos, creating spaces of informal, intergenerational debate, gathering resources for propaganda and legal support, and preempting the isolation that is the express purpose of government repression. The neighborhood assemblies are directly responsible for at least part of the unprecedented turnout of nearly a thousand people taking the streets in a solidarity demonstration the same day that Catalan police began arresting protestors identified from the June Parliament blockade (see "Wave of Arrests Sweep Barcelona http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/10/10/crackdown-in-spain/). Since we've met our neighbors in the streets, we're no longer alone, and the State can try to lock us up or wear us down, but they cannot isolate us.

What's more, the neighborhood assemblies attack capitalist isolation and the enclosure of public space in the very act of meeting. Every neighborhood assembly is also an occupation that takes over a plaza, park, or street corner *without permission,* eroding legality and demonstrating that the city is ours. On countless occasions, neighborhood assemblies have blocked major streets as an act of protest (against a hospital closing, for example), or they have decided, almost whimsically, to hold their meeting in a large intersection and simply shut down traffic. In the feeder marches to major protests the people of a neighborhood have met to march all the way to the center, blocking every street along the way, even though they may only consist of forty people. And because of the greater social legitimacy enjoyed by the neighborhood assembly as opposed to some political faction or specific organization, the police have been hesitant to create problems because any repression would draw more people down into the streets. Temporarily, the neighborhood assemblies have negated government sovereignty in the streets; if the police ask whether marchers have a permit, they just get laughed at.



movement has been largely reabsorbed into a broader, older, and more intelligent movement with much deeper roots: namely, the anticapitalist movement.

Within the neighborhood assemblies, which are interwoven with workplace struggles and the fight against privatization and cutbacks in health and education, the confused and populist calls for electoral reform have given way to more revolutionary visions. Just a brief scene from our meeting on Wednesday night can give an indication of the healthy effect this radicalization has had on morale:

There were perhaps seventy of us, people from our neighborhood and a few people from other neighborhoods who had come to share. This time, instead of the usual plaza, we were meeting in front of the nearby hospital that is being forced to close down or privatize. Capriciously, we had decided to hold the assembly in the intersection of two streets, shutting down traffic to cut down on the noise, win space for our meeting, and most of all, just because we wanted to, to demonstrate that the city was ours. At one point, a younger person spoke of the need to remember our prisoners and the people facing trial for fighting against an eviction or for harrassing politicians during the Parliament blockade, and not just to remember them today but to remember and support them a year from now, and as long as there are prisoners. Everybody applauded. Subsequently, a woman in her 60s spoke of the need to increase our forces, to fight harder, to get out of control, to do whatever it takes to shut this system down. People cheered loudly. Another speaker remarked on the need to support the struggle beyond any single issue, as important as the problem of healthcare is, because in truth we were struggling against capitalism. Another urged everyone to boycott the upcoming elections. Only one of these people, as far as I know, was an anarchist, but no political division was visible. All of us were just neighbors, and each of these statements won broad agreement.

changes their perception of what is normal and what is possible. This is no small accomplishment. If someone were to write the definitive history of capitalism, the 20th century's enclosure of public space would merit as much attention as the enclosure of communal lands hundreds of years ago, that allowed capitalism to develop in the first place.

The US, once again, is at a disadvantage in this respect. Whereas all European cities were originally designed for defense and at a certain point they had to be redesigned to put the would-be invader at an advantage, thus allowing armies to easily reoccupy cities—it wasn't only Paris, after all, that had its commune—US cities were designed from the start according to the needs of Capital. It is no coincidence that Capital and the police forces of social control experience converging needs.

Nonetheless, public space does exist in the US, however inconvenient its shape, and it must be taken for popular struggles to advance. The occupy movement is clearly breaking ground in this respect, although the embarrassing habit in several cities of asking for permission for what is supposed to be an occupation endangers any gains that have been won.

## Break Out of the Democratic Ideology

In many other cities, leading activists in the 15M movement succeeded in imposing pacifist, populist, and democratic limits to the plaza occupations, meaning that anarchists and other radicals were expelled, while fascists, among others, were included. But in Barcelona, thanks perhaps to the Catalan spirit of independence, the occupation maintained an autonomous character from the beginning, defeating an explicit attempt by would-be leaders to impose a narrow program. Not coincidentally, the Barcelona occupation maintained a greater heterogeneity and a greater force than most other cities' occupations. And since then, the new



Interestingly, the plaza occupations that began on the 15th of May provided a unique opportunity for people trying to change the world to meet each other and increase our forces and understanding, but it seems that at each step, we had to pass an obstacle constituted by the original forms of the 15M movement. Similarly in the US, the starting points imposed by the Occupy Wall Street action serve as a sort of cocoon that must be broken in order to go further. A number of features that have aided the growth of our struggle in Barcelona may be useful for people in the US to reflect on in comparison with the occupations now happening in New York and other cities.

## History is Wisdom

The deeper a struggle's historical roots, the greater its collective knowledge. In the beginning, both the media and some leading activists tried to present the 15M movement as something new. But in reality, the vast majority of us who occupied Plaça Catalunya and created the movement with our own participation were informed by a lifetime of frustrations and a long history of struggles. In Barcelona, that history includes the struggle against the austerity measures (including two general strikes and a Mayday riot, among innumerable smaller actions), the student movement against the privatization of education, the squatters' movement, anti-border and immigrant solidarity struggles, the anti-war and anti-globalization movements at the beginning of the last decade, the struggle against gentrification and the Olympics in the '90s, the struggle in the prisons or the movement of military objectors in the '80s, the workers' autonomy and neighborhood movements at the end of the dictatorship and the transition to democracy, the clandestine struggle against Franco, the Civil War, and going back to the beginning of the century, the anarchist struggle against capitalism.

All of these movements constitute lessons learned that can be passed down to aid future struggles. So often, the mistakes that defeat a revolutionary movement are repeated. The neighborhood assemblies in Barcelona serve as spaces where people from different generations can share their perspectives, where those with experience in past struggles can collectivize that experience and turn it into communal property. In the beginning, the organizers of the 15M movement presented their protest model as something ultramodern, with more references to Twitter than to the country's rich history of social movements. This model was rejected by many in Barcelona, especially older people or those who had already participated in a previous movement. People preferred to build off their own tradition of struggle, while taking advantage of the new situation and adapting certain features of the 15M model to their use.

The historical memory of past instances of bureaucratization, co-optation by grassroots politicians, and pacification have already served to help the ongoing movement avoid a number of pitfalls. Despite attempts to centralize them, the neighborhood assemblies remain independent and decentralized, allowing for a broader, freer participation, and meaning that politicians who attempt to take advantage of these spaces are at a disadvantage because they cannot operate openly without being kicked out of the assemblies.

The memory of struggles from before the global economic crash has allowed people to move beyond a simple kneejerk response to the present crisis and instead formulate a deeper critique of the system responsible for their woes. In practice, this has meant a popular shift from complaints about specific laws or specific features of the banking system that might serve as scapegoats for the crisis, to a radical critique of government and capitalism. While the movement is heterogeneous and by no means consistent, on multiple occasions it has popularly defined itself as anticapitalist, thus drawing on a strong tradition of struggle that goes back more than a century throughout Europe.



The progressive bumper sticker cliché about "thinking globally" is not enough. People also need to understand themselves as part of those global struggles, able to influence and be influenced by them.

## Take Public Space

Barcelona is a city with a long history of popular life in public space. Chris Ealham, in *Anarchism in the City,* describes how workers pushed into overcrowded slum housing at the end of the 19th century converted the streets into their living rooms, creating an indispensable foundation for the informal neighborhood networks that gave strength to subsequent anticapitalist movements. This street culture survived the decades of fascism intact only to be sharply and effectively undermined by the democratic regime starting at the end of the '70s. The Olympic Games of '92 provided a major boost to commercial urbanization, and the civic behavior ordinances, passed in Catalunya after consultation with ex-NYC mayor Rudi Giuliani, might have been the penultimate nail in the coffin of street culture. Barcelona was fast closing in on the American model of the total privatization of public space that not only prohibits—but also installs new urban architecture to engineer out of existence—anyone who is not a consumer in motion.

The neighborhood assemblies are starting to reverse this process, drawing on popular memory of the way things used to be, and architectural remnants such as central plazas in each neighborhood. The more modern neighborhoods that bear greater similarity with US urban spaces and have no plazas take advantage of well positioned parks.

By holding their meetings outside, without permission, the neighborhood assemblies are eroding government and commercial sovereignty over public space and creating a visible referent for self-organization. Even though only fifty people might participate in a particular assembly, thousands see that it exists, and this

The American identity needs to be challenged as one of the oldest tools for getting the middle and lower sectors of US society to betray themselves and help push down those who are even lower in the hierarchy. The US could not possibly have created the largest wealth gap in the so-called developed world without the complicity of large parts of the population. Just below the 1%, there are plenty of people looking for a leg up, and they're more than happy to pretend they're just like everyone else if it lets them shake a few more apples from the tree.

Another disadvantage that needs to be overcome in the US is the near total absence of place. Hardly anyone is from anywhere, and most places are built according to the needs of planned obsolescence, so that local identities barely have any common foundation from one decade to the next. The landscape itself is constantly dissolving. In the US, people are born into precarity and forced mobility. In the past, the most extreme cases, the tramps, developed their own nomad culture, and these tramps were a major force in US labor struggles at the beginning of the 20th century, making up a large part of the Industrial Workers of the World, to name an example. But even this has been marginalized or made to disappear.

This alienation of place cannot be accepted with resignation as a simple feature of American society. It is the direct result of capitalist strategies of accumulation and State strategies of repression. How many times has the US government used the forced internal relocation of oppressed groups as an explicit strategy for social control? The only country I can think of that has done this more is China (going back, interestingly enough, through the Communist period all the way to the early dynasties).

In order to overcome the severe disadvantages created by the denial of place, American rebels and revolutionaries need to hold on to their locale for dear life, prevent its periodic reconstruction or gentrification, and put down roots. The idea of "American" as a homogenous, uniting ideal and xenophobic sense of specialness needs to be eroded in favor of local cultures and global awareness.



The United States is also a country with inspiring histories of popular struggle. But it is a country with a case of social amnesia like no other. It seems that to a certain extent, the Occupy Wall Street actions exist more as a trend than anything else. The slight extent to which they draw on, or even make reference to, earlier struggles, even struggles from the past twenty years, is worrying. The fact that a present awareness of US history would shatter certain cornerstones of the new movement's identity, for example this idea of the 99% that includes everyone but the bankers in one big, happy family, is not a sufficient excuse to avoid this task. The historical amnesia of American society must be overcome for a struggle to gain the perspective it needs.

## International Connections Feed Local Roots

The local roots of the neighborhood assemblies foster a great many advantages that have allowed these bodies to become useful tools at everyone's disposal, provided the participants recognize them for what they are. Especially those assemblies that have remained informal places of meeting, despite the frequent attempts by grassroots politicians to herd them into some formal structure or another, serve a primary function of allowing neighbors to meet each other and share their stories, thus fulfilling a fundamental emotional need for human contact that contrasts with everyday alienation. It is the fulfillment of this need that keeps many people coming back; not just the activists who were already meeting junkies before May 15, but the old folks who had long since given up on meetings, as well as the hospital and education workers or the young students who had never participated in meetings before all this.

The assemblies of some neighborhoods, particularly the more yuppy ones that are full of liberals and authoritarian socialists, have chased away a great deal of participation by spending months

deciding on a unitary definition of themselves, or otherwise using consensus or voting processes to achieve a forced and artificial unity. Meanwhile, the more fluid, effective assemblies have recognized that, as it was articulated on one occasion, "we're not an organization, we're a neighborhood; we don't have unity, we have heterogeneity. The only thing we have in common is that we live in the same neighborhood and we're trying to make things better."

The fact that we have brought our focus to the neighborhood we inhabit spares us from the abstractions and mediations of politics, allows us to measure our success not in meaningless figures like the number of people who come out to a protest but in very real, increasingly visible quantities, such as the extent to which we know each other, to which we are no longer strangers in our own neighborhoods, and the extent to which these relations of acquaintance are transforming into relations of material and emotional solidarity.

The city, in fact, is an abstraction. In the particular case of Barcelona, most of the neighborhoods were independent villages that were absorbed by the life-devouring machine—first based in industry and now in tourism—that is Barcelona. Village/neighborhood identity was lost as the urban fiction advanced. Returning to the neighborhoods allows us to recover a human scale and distances us from the illusion of politics, which places all emphasis and power at the so-called higher levels of organization. If we ever regain power over our own lives, it will mean nearly all coordination and decision-making takes place at the level on which our own direct participation is possible: locally. This local emphasis has meant that in the attempts to create a coordinating body among the different neighborhood assemblies—a process rife with possibilities for bureaucratization or take-over by self-appointed representatives, if history is any indication—most assemblies have insisted on jealously preserving their own autonomy, putting the centralizers at a distinct disadvantage.



Notwithstanding, the localization of this movement is aided immeasurably by its international contacts. Thanks to the participation of immigrants in these assemblies, we have access to the experience of neighborhood assemblies in Argentina in 2001, the lessons of the Chilean student movement or the Mapuche struggle, or the model developed over the last several years by the Seattle Solidarity Network, to name just a few examples. And because of direct relationships of solidarity with international struggles, when the pacifists try to hijack the story of the Arab Spring or the uprising in Iceland to try and steer the movement in Barcelona towards legalism and civility, people with friends and comrades in Cairo or Reykjavik can remind everyone that those revolts were fought with sticks, stones, and molotov cocktails, and that in any case it's still too early to declare victory.

It seems that in many cities in the US, the occupy movement is marked by a certain chauvinism that at most takes some inspiration from struggles in other parts of the world, without taking any critical lessons. The idea of "taking back America" is a tried and true strategy for self-defeat: creating a fictive community that in reality includes conflicting interests and conflicting desires and will inevitably be directed by its most powerful elements.

Actually, one need not even look to other countries to find the problem with this sort of populism. George Washington and James Madison were among the richest inhabitants of the North American colonies. They used a unifying patriotism to whip the farmers and laborers into a frenzy, do the fighting and dying for them, kick out the 1% represented by the British overlords, and then when it was all done they wrote a Constitution that preserved their privilege and power, subsequently crushing several farmers' rebellions that rose up to contest this quiet counterrevolution. Neither did they blink, so soon after their pretty talk about "liberty," while continuing their policy of genocide against Native Americans and enslavement of kidnapped Africans.