

# Lost in the Fog

Dead Ends and Potentials of the Occupy Movement

Lost Children's School of Cartography

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# Introduction

*So what do you make of this Occupy movement in America?* Of course it is the news that everyone wants to hear about. Al Jazeera claimed shortly after the encampment near Wall Street was founded that the Occupy movement in America was facing a mainstream “media blackout.” But in reality, it seemed that nearly every media source was dedicating coverage nationally and internationally. Despite all the press, if one added up the total number of participants in the fledgling occupations throughout America at that time, he would end up with far less than the total number of demonstrators at a general strike in Athens, or a single American anti-war demonstration from 2004.

This alone should serve as a cause for skepticism, although perhaps it is only predictable that in America, of all places, a social movement would arise firstly as the mere spectacle of revolt. After all, its initial coordinators intended from its inception that the Occupy movement of America be a copy of a copy. The genuine, spontaneous, and seemingly unstoppable surge of rage — the insurrection — in the Arab world had already been watered down into the pacifist *indignados* movement of Europe. Next the American radicals who called for an occupation of Wall Street would try to copy-and-paste the *indignados* movement to America by sprinkling a tactic — occupation — on what they hoped would prove grounds fertile enough to grow a movement.

That movement now seems to be swept up in its own momentum, and every day there are new developments in what seems to be a genuinely unpredictable and leaderless social reaction. While the occupations were perhaps first populated by the same cliques of activists who had championed the previous failed American social movements, the encampments and demonstrations have grown because they have attracted the self-identified American “middle class.” As American society comes under further blows of the so-called “crisis” of capitalism, the illusion of middle class comfort dissipates, revealing its previously hidden, but now more apparent, dispossession. The Occupy movement is an opportunity for the middle class to protest the “unfairness” of their *proletarianization*. In part thanks to widespread disillusionment with political representatives, previously non-activist citizens are suddenly eager to participate in an activist social movement. Paradoxically, the brightest hope we can find in this situation is also the grimmest fact: the increasingly dire economic situation is not turning around, and life will not go back to the way it once was. It is precisely because the movement for a preservation of the illusory American dream is doomed to fail that the Occupy movement has the potential to supersede itself.

Of course, regardless of its active decomposition, the middle class carries its values into the movement — the ideological values of the *good citizen*. One could characterize the Occupy movement as a citizens’ movement for the survival of capitalist democracy in a moment ripe with potentials for true rupture. Here, self-described radicals, anti-authoritarians and in some cases even anarchists may play the most critical but hidden roles in recuperation, if in their well-intentioned attempt to “build the new world in the shell of the old” they actually succeed at *protecting the core of the old world in the shell of the new*. (We will elaborate on this in a moment.)

But there is also a beautiful discord within the situation. The Occupy movement can hardly be summed up by any particular ideological stance, and its greatest potentials spring from its chaotic features and resistance to definition. Anarchists who have stubbornly refused any participation in what they have disregarded as merely a bourgeois movement have safeguarded their identities as the most radical of all at the cost of guaranteeing their own irrelevancy in the developing situation. In order to move the Occupy movement in the direction of genuine upheaval, anarchists must participate to cause sustained and intensifying disruption and destruction of the apparatuses of capital in order to make this movement a threat to capitalism, aiming to outflank the state by generalizing these tactics. We will also explore the developments in this direction so far as well as some future potentials.

# I. The Destruction of Experience

When a half-completed action, which has been suddenly obstructed, tries to carry on further in a form which it hopes will sooner or later allow it to finish and realize itself — like a generator transforming mechanical energy into electrical energy which will be reconverted into mechanical energy by a motor miles away — at this moment language swoops down on living experience, ties it hand and foot, robs it of its substance, abstracts it. It always has categories ready to condemn to incomprehensibility and nonsense anything which they cannot contain, to summon into existence-for-Power that which slumbers in nothingness because it has no place as yet in the system of Order. The repetition of familiar signs is the basis of ideology.

— R. Vaneigem

The rise of interdependency of people and technologies has left us with the *destruction of experience*. Experience can be found not in reading the news, with its abundance of remote fragments of information, nor during the journey through the nether realms of the subway; not in the demonstration that suddenly blocks the streets; nor in the cloud of tear gas slowly dispersing amid the buildings downtown. It does not suffice to move about, to lose and acquire things, to have encounters, or even to witness more dramatic acts such as political resistance and violence in order to have experience. Wherever we turn experience eludes us. Experience is transmitted not by the extraordinary but by the everyday and it is the very ability to share and communicate everyday experience that has been lost. We have, therefore, “events” — staggering quantities of them — but they are assimilated into no real experience.

To arrive in a space, for the purposes of this essay, we begin in New York city, amidst half a billion people and an embryonic social movement. It could superficially appear to be somewhat of a break from the character of the typical everyday life, emptied of experience. To the contrary, the unifying slogan of the Occupy movement, “we are the 99%,” is a shining example of this profound loss of meaning. Hundreds of people, especially in the first days of the occupations, stood before a crowd, many for the first time, to share their stories of dispossession living under modern capitalism. To mention the slogan again, “we are the 99%,” the intended meaning of which is “we are 99% of the population and it is the 1% — the elite class — which reaps the benefits of our misery,” is not an innocuous statement, whatever truth may be found therein.

Some of the first images of the occupation at Zuccotti park were taken from cell phone cameras, but this tendency to distance oneself by standing behind a camera is not the only reason these moments too lacked *experience*. One could also witness the lack when, in the early days of the occupation, Slavoj Žižek gave a speech which was naturally captured on video and viewed widely on the internet. For the first time people around the country and around the world saw the self-proclaimed inventiveness of the Occupy activists at work. The ‘People’s Mic’ is a technique which developed out of the police prohibitions of voice amplifying devices, such as microphones and

megaphones, and has rapidly become a symbolic tool for the expression of a unified voice in lieu of any pretense of individuality.

It would be a misreading of this text to assume an elitist tone from the characterization of the Occupy activists as one and the same. In fact we would like to point to the divisions within this 99% that are irreparable, unalienable and inexorable. This slogan functions in favor of control through inclusion. It is an ideological position prevalent throughout liberal democratic society, that of multiculturalism and the insistence upon tolerance, which has emerged as a right-hand-man to Order, intent on wiping out any agitational forces within the movement, even calling in back up forces of control, i.e. the police. Upon seeing the video on Youtube of the aforementioned speech in which Zizek states “we are awakening from a dream which has turned into a nightmare,” one cannot help but feel a bodily chill provoked by the repetition from the audience. The mob repeats these words like a nightmarish brainwashing, reaffirming its unity by simultaneously raising its cell phones to capture the event. Perhaps a certain truth is revealed in the natural emphasis given to certain words of speeches due to the tendency for one to repeat only what she feels resonance with and more loudly, with greater verve. Yet, it is evidence only of the fundamental loss that these subjects have suffered that this repetitive game comes with such ease, and seemingly without a sense of fear, much less a sense of irony.

The reports about this tactic of repeating the words of fellow occupants consistently takes a positive tone. It is implicit in these accounts that the visceral effect of this process has an all-out beneficial outcome, that unanimity is a desirable end, and that unanimity could even call itself *diversity*. What is lost here, besides half the time on the clock to allow for repetition, is an analysis of the ways in which the People’s Mic contains the same coercive effects as watching the television news or sitting behind a computer screen. The People’s Mic, like the news, or the internet, relies upon the subject’s passivity, while at the same time presenting the dangerous illusion of participatory action. It is the loss of unmitigated communication has created pervasive passivity. The reliance upon a distanced intake of information, and the conclusion of respect for the authority of a speaker behind a podium or at the occupied park, hints at the *authority of the event*.

What *would* be truly inspiring is if the situation was turned completely around: if the crowds refused this ventriloquism in favor of the hundreds of conversations waiting all around them. Imagine the occupation flipped on its axis, its inhabitants *acting* together based upon true affinity and setting their spectator role alight; the chaotic environment consumed in a cacophony edging toward real *experience*.

## II. The Events of the ‘Occupy’ movement

Wall Street was the initial line that divided the colonists from natives, the “civilized” from the “savage,” and after the wall fell, what came to divide individuals was what Wall Street controlled: the flow of capital. The obvious significance of such a target has previously been noted by the enemies of power. On September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1920, Wall Street was bombed as an act of revenge for the state’s framing and indictment of the Italian immigrants and anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti. The bomb, carried within a horse drawn carriage, shattered the autumn morning in the financial district of New York, killing 38 people and injuring nearly two hundred more, in an explosion of light and sound. The actors left a trail of leaflets which read “Remember, we will not take it any longer. Free political prisoners or it will be sure death of all of you,” and was signed by “Anarchist Fighters.”

The Washington Post, at the time, called the bombing “an act of war.” In the pages of American History this attack, which shut down the economic nerve center of American capitalism, is considered the first act of American terrorism. No surprise then that ninety-one years and one day later — September 17<sup>th</sup> 2011 — a call issued by the Canadian anti-capitalist magazine *Adbusters* to shut down Wall Street again — this time with a 20,000 person occupation — warranted extra attention from the state. But on the day of the proposed action, a demonstration of only a few thousand people neared Wall Street, protesting economic injustice. The police successfully pushed the demonstration to Zuccotti Park (which occupiers later renamed Liberty Park) sweeping the demonstration from the very space which it sought to disrupt and into the corner. This park, like most parks and squares in American cities, has gradually been emptied of life by anti-social ordinances to keep people from inhabiting it, or even sharing any meaningful amount of time within it. Thus ensued the ‘festival’ atmosphere which would characterize much of the ‘Occupy’ movement. This celebratory tone of social movements is familiar to activists and wholly apart from the realm of conflict. The speed with which this was accomplished was not only due to the size of the demonstration, a mere 2,000 people, but also a result of the strength of the planned police repression by the city.

The level of police control over the event signals the potential threat that occupations contain. There was nearly one NYPD officer for every 15 people present, including police in full riot gear. The NYPD issued a 10 pm curfew for the area and shut down the power on the blocks of the occupation in order to encourage people to leave. After the police arrested 700 people for marching on the Brooklyn bridge, occupations appeared in numerous cities around the nation. The tactic of occupying public space generalized to hundreds of cities in the U.S. within weeks and within a month there were more than one thousand occupations nation wide.

As diverse as the context of the occupations may have been given their relative geographic proximity, the organizing committees were united by a central theme: insistence upon lawfulness. The official calls to “Occupy” were thick with the language of the law, going so far in New York as to insist “the sovereign people of any nation have the right to guide the destiny of their nation

and may do so by respecting the law.” September 17<sup>th</sup> was to be peaceful day of rage. The internet overflowed with ‘how to’ manuals designating appropriate, and legal, demonstrator tactics.

The occupations in the United States claimed inspiration from North Africa and Europe, and in doing so reduced the rebellious occupations of Tahrir Square to calls for Western-style democracy. By understanding the Egyptian insurrection as a non-violent movement for democracy, the American occupy activists affirm their own pacifism and cry for so-called “real democracy.” This obscures from view the general discontent with the global capitalist system.

#### *The 2011 Oakland General Strike*

Oscar Grant Plaza is named after a man who was killed by Bay Area transit police on New Year’s day in 2009. In response Oakland saw days of rioting. When an occupation began in the plaza in October of 2011, and shortly thereafter received an eviction notice from the city government, it thus came as no surprise that the occupiers’ response was uncompromising. The memory of those riots, and a widespread hatred for the police in general, formed the back drop of a scene ripe for social upheaval. The response to the eviction notice read:

Social rebels from around Oakland have created a genuine autonomous space free of police and unwelcome to politicians. Whereas other occupations have welcomed police and politicians into the occupation, negotiating with them, Oakland has carved a line in the cement. That line of demarcation says: If you pass, if you try and break or shadow this autonomous space, you are well aware what we are capable of.

Nonetheless, the government’s attack came on October 25, with police from 18 Northern California jurisdictions — from cities as far away as Vacaville, Fremont, and Palo Alto — and was a militarized operation. The 600 cops, outfitted with riot gear and backed by armored vehicles and helicopters, moved in, preemptively shooting tear gas canisters and “beanbag” rounds and throwing flash-bang grenades.

Iraq War veteran Scott Olsen had his skull fractured by a tear gas canister which was fired directly at his head, and as others came to his rescue another cop threw a grenade directly at them. Videos of this went viral on the internet, helping to catalyze the growing anger into concrete actions. On October 26<sup>th</sup> the General Assembly of Oakland called for a General Strike for November 2<sup>nd</sup>. In the United States only 11.9% of the working class is unionized; for much wider involvement would be required for a successful general strike.

No General Strike has happened in the United States since 1946 when, also in Oakland, one hundred thousand people successfully shut down the city. On the day of November 2<sup>nd</sup> no one was certain if the general strike would indeed occur. We have yet to see a thorough analysis of the composition of strikers that day, but tens of thousands of people — as many as 100,000 by larger estimates — turned out to the marches and, despite serious conflicts with non-violent activists and citizens protecting property from people intent on destroying it, the day was considered a victory. In fact, the crowds of otherwise good citizens cheered when bank windows were shattered, a reaction seldom seen in the United States and surely an indicator of growing discontent with the capitalist order. The ports of Oakland were shut down for the day both by the mobs of demonstrators surrounding them, and by the Longshoreman union of port workers, who participated in the strike.

Since the general strike in Oakland the occupied encampments have been contested terrain, with police evicting them and demonstrators re-occupying.



## Police Repression

The police repression of most occupations has been swift and brutal. In Atlanta the police evicted a group of 200 people from Troy Davis park with 100 police including riot squads, helicopters, and cops on horseback. In North Carolina, after a building was occupied for only one day, the police invaded with assault rifles to evict the occupation in the early hours of the morning. This display of force is intended to dissuade occupy activists from escalating the situation further by taking buildings, action which constitutes a real threat to capitalism.

The state is employing a familiar tactic to disrupt this movement — tiring people out with the threat of lengthy court procedures and serious legal charges. In the first month of occupations there had been over three thousand arrests, and hundreds more since.

While the overt repression by the police makes their role inarguable, there are less apparent forms that police disruption could take. Repeatedly, some elements of the movement call for police to join the occupations as part of the 99% and police unions have endorsed the occupation in Baltimore, Maryland. Clearly, the asphyxiation that the inclusion of police would have on the already pro law-and-order occupations is one possible dead end that the occupations face.

All across the country the state employs a two fold strategy to strangling the occupations: the inclusion of the occupations within the paradigm of the law and the simultaneous exclusion of its violent potential force. In places such as Sacramento district attorneys have refused to prosecute protestors, speaking up in support of the movement. In Orange County, California, tents were declared by the city to be legally protected “free speech.”

In Seattle, where occupiers have refused to cooperate with city officials and instead have used the encampment as a base to plan actions against banks and foreclosures, the police have attacked demonstrators indiscriminately. They are now under scrutiny after a crowd was wildly pepper-sprayed while complying with police by moving out of the street and on to the sidewalk. Among them was an 84 year old woman. The image of her tear-streaked face became the photo opportunity for the pacifists to tout their self-fulfilling logic which mistakes publicizing the brutality of the police for a substantive critique of the police-state-apparatus. She has now appeared as a guest on international progressive media such as *Democracy Now*. Also among those attacked by the police at this demonstration was a pregnant woman, who the police kicked and hit in the stomach with a bicycle, then pepper sprayed. She was rushed to the hospital, but still suffered a miscarriage. This very brutal and publicized attack comes as another in a long string of unprovoked violence from Seattle police, who faced both a militant anti-police movement in the streets and the beginning of a Federal investigation last winter.

More interesting still, Oakland Mayor Jean Quan admitted to a conference call between at least 18 other city leaders to address the problem of the occupations, and specifically to address the problem of anarchist involvement:

I was recently on a conference call of 18 cities across the country who had the same situation, where what had started as a political movement and a political encampment ended up being an encampment that was no longer in control of the people who started them. And what I think you're starting to see is that the Occupy movement is looking for more stability. I spent a lot of last week talking to peaceful demonstrators, ones who wanted to separate themselves in my city away from the anarchist groups who had been looking for a confrontation with the police.

The conference calls were organized by the Police Executive Research Forum, a national police group, one of the 17,000 police agencies in the country. The former Seattle chief of police, Norm Stamper, in an interview following the most recent brutal incident of police repression in Seattle, articulated the insidious strategy that police agencies across the country should be employing against Occupy demonstrations:

If the police and the community in a democratic society are really working hard — and it is hard work — to forge authentic partnerships rather than this unilateral, paramilitary response to these demonstrations, that the relationship itself serves as a shock absorber. Picture police officers helping to protect the demonstrators. Picture demonstrators saying, “We see people on the fringes, for example, who are essentially undemocratic in their tactics. And so, we need to work together to resolve that issue.”

The triumph of American policing is this partnership that Stamper eludes to. Programs devoted to the furtherance of identification with authority are the most effective way that the policing apparatus functions, at once reducing the material role of the police in society and more than doubling its unpaid workforce.

A society whose central strategy for control is observation and localized containment sees its greatest threat in that which it cannot identify. Thus, by identifying the conflictual elements as “anarchist”, the police and politicians have gotten something right and at the same time made a gross and self-assuring leap. The forces of disorder in this situation are not, in fact, anarchist alone. They are much more broad, more multitudinous than the forces of order have imagined.

### III. Dead Ends

#### The Ballot Box as Coffin

In a moment we will explore the potentials for the Occupy movement to become a real threat to capital. For now, we will dedicate some thought to the various dead ends the movement may face.

Overt repression of a movement is the simplest termination to understand, but also the least likely that this movement will face. A brutal or violent suppression of a protest movement that has mostly agreed to play by the rules could cause a crisis of legitimacy for the American state and cause the demonstrations to increase rapidly in size and intensity. In United States society, even the staunchest of good citizens holds the belief in “freedom of speech” as a practically sacred right. For this and other reasons, a far more likely outcome, and a more efficient avenue for the state, is the violent suppression of any uncontrollable elements of the movement combined with the seamless recuperation of its more digestible elements.

The more liberal of America’s two political parties immediately moved to absorb the Occupy movement as a movement for voters in next year’s presidential election. There is a reason that the reigning president of the United States and other political functionaries of the Democratic party have officially endorsed the Occupy movement. It is important to remember that Obama’s last election campaign was experienced as a “grassroots” “activist” event for so many American voters who essentially cast a ballot for “change” from the stifling climate of the Bush era. The swindle was effective, and Obama was voted in wearing the mask of the *activist* politician; he then proceeded to carry on business as usual. Like the most formulaic of Hollywood sequels, it would be completely unsurprising for the Democratic architects to repackage the same script again. Their campaign to woo occupiers could even be timed cleverly: a long winter spent sleeping in tents and being beaten and pepper sprayed by police could revive the exhausted, naive belief that one’s troubles can be voted away.

The citizens’ values that the middle class carries into the movement prepare the occupations to be buried in the ballot box. Through insisting on a discourse and practice grounded in non-violence and at times even legality (highlighted, for example, in the ridiculous claim that the Egyptian insurrection was a “non-violent revolution,” a common farce in the American movement at least until Egyptian comrades addressed it directly in their beautiful statement, “Letter from Cairo”), one that affirms the very same values the state claims to defend and honor, such as free speech and democracy, and limited to a critique of “corporate greed” rather than the alienating and dispossessing social relationship of capitalism, liberals attempt to remove any rough edges that would prevent the movement from integrating smoothly into the dominant political apparatus. Furthermore, in contrast to acting directly to abolish alienation together for ourselves and our desires, as in insurrection, to center activity on indignation and protest implies a continued belief in some authority who can hear and possibly grant our demands. Here we recall an anecdote from the *indignados* movement of Barcelona: the same pacifists of the plaza move-

ment who would cry “non-violent movement!” and “provocateur!” at individuals who dared to so much as block traffic during the occupation of Plaza Catalunya nonetheless took a liking to the common Catalan anarchist slogan, “No one represents us.” It soon became a popular slogan in the *indignados* movement, but in passing from the anarchists to the pacifists its meaning altered significantly without the changing of a single word. Whereas anarchists have used the slogan to mean “we won’t allow anyone to represent us,” the new significance seems to be, “we are protesting because we have been insufficiently represented.” This position begs for the response of *better representatives*.

One perspective from U.S. comrades has been that, while a critique of these limiting ideologies must be persistently present in the occupations in order to keep the situation from becoming controlled by political parties or would-be leaders, it is only through participation in struggle that American citizens will lose their illusions. For example, the infuriating and common argument at multiple encampments that the police should not be vocally – and certainly not violently – opposed because “they too are a part of the 99%” will not die out because of superior anarchist arguing against the role of the police in the protection of capital, but through citizens’ own direct experience with police brutality. Indeed, already the tone of the relationship between demonstrators and police has changed as police have repeatedly used chemical weapons and so-called “less lethal” ammunition to disperse peaceful protestors. But the strength of the citizen identity should not be underestimated: one popular reaction to the police violence has not been to fight back but to claim that police should not be beating passive demonstrators, but rather *doing their jobs* and *arresting* them. In Seattle, a protest against police violence recently took the position that police should *join* the movement. In Washington D.C., when members of the encampment were asked by the media why the police had let them be while encampments in New York, Oakland, and Portland were being evicted, they cited their “very good working relationship with the police” and, of course, their commitment to non-violence.

The seemingly tireless drive to keep the movement as civil and non-threatening as possible has not barred some radicals from predicting that the political apparatus will be incapable of co-opting the Occupy movement. It’s worth remembering that the anti-war movement of the early 2000s swelled to massive proportions (with 800,000 marching against the ruling political party in New York City in 2004, dwarfing any given day of all occupations in America combined) but was in the end completely disempowering, more or less terminating in the dead end of a failed voter’s movement against Bush. But this situation is different: whereas the anti-war movement was largely dominated and organized by liberal and leftist non-governmental organizations, according to reports from comrades in the U.S., their attempts to co-opt or control the current movement have been laughably inadequate. Combining this with the simple fact that for a long time very few people have taken elections seriously in the U.S., with the majority nearly always abstaining from voting at all, perhaps it is true that the electoral machine will be powerless to transform the Occupy movement into a voter’s mobilization. Still, this conclusion merely begs the question of what form recuperation will take, and to answer this we must look more closely at the more insidious pitfalls that may be laid by radicals themselves.

## Prefiguring What? On Guarding the Old World in the Shell of the New

The more optimistic of radicals have not hesitated to call the Occupy movement a “true revolutionary moment.” Indeed, the movement seems to be growing, and for the most part the overt repression we have already described has only seemed to bring more people into the streets. It remains to be seen if this will continue after the latest wave of coordinated evictions described above. But assuming for a moment that the occupations will in fact continue to grow, we must analyze exactly *what kind* of revolution might be happening. Those who make revolutions by halves are only digging their own graves, and any revolution that fails to constitute a real *crisis* to capitalism — the realization of communism and anarchy — will wind up providing capitalism with the modifications it needs to survive the superficial crises of its own design. To some, it may seem extraordinarily pessimistic to propose that what some are considering the most inspiring social movement of their lives may actually be the creation of the new forms of social organization through which the dominant order will survive. But it isn’t hard to imagine that, in a world turned upside down by capital, social movements would be animated by the need to resolve the internal contradictions of capitalism in order to ensure its survival for another era, rather than the drive to set the world on its feet.

History is the graveyard of all our ancestors’ half-revolutions, and anarchists should know the tombstones by heart. Here we would like to offer a very recent example of the ways that new modes of struggle offered by radicals quickly become the dominant and ubiquitous modes of alienated survival under capitalism. In 1999, Indymedia was developed in Seattle as a way to break capitalist control of the media through decentralized, participatory content generation, publication, and editing. The new potentials of communication that were opened by the technological developments of the internet age were seized upon by radicals as new opportunities for self-representation and self-organization. Less than a decade later, the internet is completely dominated by user-generated content and self-representation, from Facebook to news blogs — but this is almost entirely corporate controlled and for-profit. Social media is the most glaring example of modern alienation — individuals brought together in their isolation — and it is also widely known that the State relies heavily on social media to spy on activists and radicals. Meanwhile (in the United States at least) the Indymedia network has largely fallen into disuse. The change Indymedia activists offered in the way news was communicated was a “radical” change in the sense that it was drastically different from what preceded it, but the social movements it was a part of were not sufficiently “radical” in that they did not successfully cut to the root of the alienation. As such, the tactical developments of radicals of that era sadly look, in retrospect, to be voluntary experimentation to discover the new forms of domination.

The optimistic radicals and anarchists are cheerleading the forms the Occupy movement has taken — the widespread use of occupation as a tactic, the creation of self-managed encampment communities, the refusal of leaders and the use of general assemblies and consensus — but we must also consider that the experimentation offered by this movement may in time pave the terrain of the future repressive society. Douglas Rushkoff, a media theorist and progressive author, has spoken in defense of the occupations by characterizing them as “prototypes for a new way of living.” In his article for CNN, “Beta-testing the New Society,” he explains that occupiers are developing new social forms, such as an alternative currency, that will help society change from a “competitive, winner-takes-all” attitude to the “mutual aid” of “local production and commerce, credit unions, unfettered access to communications technology and consensus-based democracy.”

If we are to believe Rushkoff, the occupations are not a tactic for the abolition of capitalism and government but rather the catalyst for the adaptation they need to survive after the crisis. This argument compliments the position of an article from the capitalist journal *International Business Times* entitled, "Saving Capitalism from the Capitalists," which explains the occupations should be understood (from a pro-"corporate capitalism" perspective) as "'round one' of a reform process" for "economic and fiscal reform" against the "risk and greed" that caused the meltdown of 2008. This brings to mind the unfortunate image of occupiers carrying signs reading "We're not anti-capitalism; we're anti-greed!" after the routine red-baiting of right wing news stations.

If the occupiers cannot develop strategies to truly threaten capitalism, the best they will be able to accomplish is a self-managed austerity. While the economy cannot or will not provide jobs and homes for people, and while the state cuts the meager amount of social spending that existed before, self-organized encampments provide food, makeshift shelter, entertainment, a feeling of community, some semblance of medical care, and free classes, as well as the personal fulfillment of participation in a political process. This last point is important, because it is critical to understand beyond material elements what the occupations may be providing for people that they can no longer get from the political system. At the same time that disillusionment with democratic representatives soars, capitalism seemingly no longer has any use for the people who have relied on the dual role they are now denied — worker/shopper — for their very identities. This could create a very volatile and unstable situation for power, and left unaddressed would likely contribute to an increase in riots that generalize — with insurrections that are totally irrational and uncommunicative to democratic government and capital becoming the "general strike" of the new era.

From this vantage, it becomes clear that the real risk the occupations face is worse than the usual "pressure release" feature of social movements; rather, what we could see is the self-organization of communities for survival and self-fulfillment *out of the way* of the capitalism that no longer has place for them in its chains. Democracy can even survive — and function more efficiently — as a totalitarian social mode by moving from the ballot boxes to the squares, carried on in the hearts of the good citizens who make up the assemblies. If the Occupy movement can only manage to become a revolution by half, it is prefiguration of the worst kind: the living death of participatory austerity capitalism; an inversion of an old anarchist slogan: *the preservation of the old world in the shell of the new*.

## IV. Potential

“Popular struggle is obviously not fit to strike any large scale blows but like something vaporous and fluid it should not condense anywhere.”

– Clausewitz

### From Event to Experience

In order to discern, in the chaotic confusion of the Occupy movement, where exactly the potentials lie, it is indicative to look at where power reveals itself to be threatened. It’s significant that, for the first two months, most cities have been somewhat accommodating of the occupations — as long as they stay stationed in innocuous spaces, away from the machinery of power they could disrupt. In New York, Mayor Bloomberg again took the position, as with the 2004 demonstrations against Bush, that the city government was happy to respect the “free speech” of protestors, so long as they remained within the confines of the law — and the police barricades that kept them off Wall Street.

A lesser-known example illustrates this: in Seattle, occupiers first camped out in a park at the heart of the city’s financial district. The mayor of Seattle — a progressive — publicly endorsed the occupation while also calling on the police to routinely harass protestors by enforcing the law to its most absurd extent, including a rule against tents and against sleeping in public parks. While the demonstrators were enduring the rain and the harassment of police who arrested anyone who so much as sat down with an umbrella, and who shined their flashlights in the eyes of anyone trying to sleep, the mayor graciously extended an offer for the encampment to move to the property surrounding city hall, where the occupiers would be welcome to set up tents and use the public restrooms. After much debate between the liberals who were willing to work with city officials and who saw the offer as a victory and the more radical elements who instinctively distrusted the invitations of the powerful, the camp decided to stay at the park and face the police harassment. The Seattle occupation eventually moved its headquarters to a university campus, using the encampment as a center to plan actions against banks and the occupation of foreclosed homes in the area. Because the occupation has deliberately chosen to maintain its oppositional power, the police continue to wage war on it, as described above.

As we have noted, it is precisely where the occupations have boldly moved from symbolic protest to active disruption of the apparatuses of power that police have enacted the most heavy-handed violence. If we accept, then, that the encampments themselves as protests are not threatening to the state or capitalism, and that the violent repression of any movement in the direction of occupying private property reveals how this movement might actually become threatening to power, how do we explain the coordinated evictions of encampments in New York, Portland, Denver, St. Louis, Salt Lake City, San Francisco and Oakland a little over a week ago? Without discounting the valuable contributions of some lesser-known occupations, in our analysis the

coordinated evictions are the state's response to the Oakland occupation's strategic escalation against capital, and its fear that such action may spread to other occupations. The developments in Oakland are inspiring and unprecedented. From its beginning, the Oakland occupation — or the Oakland *commune*, as some have taken to calling it — has insisted on its autonomy from the state and from capital. It has shaped itself to be not a protest encampment but a realization of a radical *being together* in which police and politicians are explicitly unwelcome and the laws and property of capitalists are disregarded. It has openly evoked the power of the city's recent riots. In fact, the mayor of Oakland, who has tried to play a similar game as the mayor of Seattle in simultaneously endorsing the occupation while also authorizing police violence against it, was chased from the occupation by the angry crowd when she tried to address it. Most importantly, the occupation has not contented itself with being a mere *alternative* to the larger society outside of it, and has reacted to repression with an offensive against capitalism: the call for a general strike. While, for the sake of strategic clarity, the significance of this event should not be exaggerated or mythologized, it should be noted that this first call for such a strike since 1946 did not come from the labor bureaucracy's representatives, but from an autonomous assembly.

The coordinated evictions that followed the general strike were the state's preemptive blow to prevent such developments from spreading. When thousands of demonstrators stormed and occupied capitol building of Madison, Wisconsin in 2011, police first fiercely guarded the government halls, and then were called off so that the movement against austerity could be defeated elsewhere: in the courts. The truth is that, in our era, the real reason for the police to viciously defend a territory is to keep an unruly population from discovering that there is *nothing there*, and that power resides elsewhere. The developments in Oakland have provoked the state to evict as many encampments as possible not in order to keep people from holding the parks (or, even more ridiculous, because of the health and safety hazards cited by local governments to justify the raids.) Rather, by breaking up the encampments, the state has temporarily forestalled the possibility of people discovering that the plazas and parks mean nothing other than an opportunity to break with everyday life, find each other, and then spread the occupations *everywhere else*, including the major power arteries of the capitalist system all around us. It is only by relentlessly pursuing war against the dominant social order that the occupations can become *communes*, and not the experimental ground from which capitalism is reformed.

## From Intelligible to Inoperative

What next? In response to the coordinated evictions, the Oakland commune has again gone on the offensive, this time calling for the coordinated shutdown of all West Coast ports on December 12<sup>th</sup>. All West Coast occupations now have their work cut out for them to plan their own attacks under the duress of the police attacks on their material bases. The trap that is laid now is for occupiers to fall into circular battles merely to keep the parks as protest spaces — especially if those battles are largely played out as courtroom dramas, as is happening currently in New York.

While *occupying everything* is a tall but necessary order for the still young Occupy movement of America, *demanding nothing* seems to have occurred quite naturally. Although Adbusters advised that demands could be decided at Occupy Wall Street's general assembly, thus far the movement has presented no official demands. This is to its benefit. The Occupy movement has been far too undefinable, fluid, leaderless, and chaotic to reach consensus on any list of demands,



and any list that could be compiled from participants would be self-contradictory. It has not even been formally decided to demand nothing — this is just the *de facto* position of a movement whose participants are motivated not by a common program or platform, but by general discontent and a preference not to continue on with business as usual.

Needless to say, any effort to speak on behalf of the movement and offer an intelligible demand to power should be resisted and shut down, and this is far easier to accomplish in a movement organized through general assemblies than in previous social movements dominated by non-governmental power concentrations. The more the Occupy movement has no regard for capitalism and its laws and protectors — the more its aims are incomprehensible to power — the better. What some have described as the confusion of this movement is in fact one of its greatest strengths in that it contributes to the movement's uncontrollable nature. By declining demands — or any dialogue with power — while expanding their occupations, the occupiers can refuse to acknowledge any authority other than their own. This undefined opposition is far more threatening to power than articulate protest, which can be digested and reworked back into the system.

The most revolutionary potential of this situation lies not in the building of a movement of some mass identity, but in the Occupy movement superseding itself by remaining a fluid, moving, and thickening fog of non-subjects realizing their desires and material needs in the immediate. This is a far cry from the current situation, and would require the destruction of the very identities now used as fortresses from which to wage struggle. We have already seen that the old forms of struggle, the general strike, can be invoked not by the old powers of labor bureaucracies or leftist political parties, but by the incoherent commune of Oakland. On this new terrain, we will witness the clashing of inoperative resistance and the identity of the middle class citizen, which will either crack under duress or which will prove itself strong enough to carry on the values of the old world — its cult of work, democracy, and alienation. We necessarily must also bring on the destruction of radical identities. The anarchist, with all her preconceived notions of how a revolution is set in motion, must also lose her specialized role in the fog, although not her wits. It is more important to find all the new pathways to generalizing revolt than to have the biggest, strongest, or most destructive black bloc. If an insurrection is to come, we will need more and more riots — not specialized rioters.

*It is fair to recognize the difficulty and the immensity of the tasks of the revolution that wants to create and maintain a classless society. It can begin easily enough wherever autonomous proletarian assemblies, not recognizing any authority outside themselves or property of anybody whatsoever, placing their will above all laws and specializations, will abolish the separation of individuals, the commodity economy and the State. But it will only triumph by imposing itself universally, without leaving a patch of territory to any form of alienated society still existing.*

**Lost Children's School of Cartography, November 2011**

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Lost Children's School of Cartography  
Lost in the Fog  
Dead Ends and Potentials of the Occupy Movement  
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