Antonio Gramsci, edited by Mark McNally, Critical Explorations in Contemporary Thought Series (New York: Palgrave, 2015): 156-178.

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Gramsci and Subaltern Struggles Today: Spontaneity, Political Organization and Occupy Wall Street

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Introduction

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci undertakes a critical analysis of subaltern groups, examining their conditions, factors contributing to their subordination, their modes of thought, culture and levels of political organization. He attempts to identify the factors that empower as well as impede subaltern groups in the transformation of their conditions. In *Notebook 3*, §48, entitled 'Past and present. Spontaneity and conscious leadership,' he argues that subaltern political struggles are often characterized by spontaneity, a factor that contributes to the ineffective and, at times, regressive aspects of subaltern political activity.[1] By 'spontaneity,' he suggests that subaltern groups act according to a restless impulse or 'instinct' to revolt, due to crises or unacceptable conditions. Subaltern groups' spontaneous rebellions and uprisings indicate social discontent and the desire for socio-political change, but such movements rarely succeed in transforming the conditions themselves. Thus, to be effective, he argues that subaltern struggles must be founded on 'conscious leadership,' which he describes as political activity informed by revolutionary theory and rooted in a systematic understanding of the historical conditions that define subalternity.

However, according to Gramsci, neither pure spontaneity nor conscious leadership exist in history. Both are representations of scholastic and academic conceptions of 'abstract theory.' There are elements and gradations of spontaneity and conscious leadership in every

movement. He makes a distinction between marginal and advanced subaltern groups, with varying levels of consciousness, leadership and organization. Marginal and less advanced groups, he argues, are inclined to act according to an incoherent conglomeration of ideas drawn from 'common sense,' such as everyday experience, popular science, folklore, traditional conceptions of the world and religion. Such movements, although not constituted from a critically defined political strategy and often dispersed, represent the will of subaltern groups to transform their conditions. It is through the practical necessity to provide 'conscious direction' to their activity that subaltern groups begin to transform their 'common sense' into what Gramsci calls 'good sense' with elements of historical and critical awareness.[2] This process, Gramsci argues, is constitutive of subaltern groups themselves, as they attempt to provide conscious direction to their spontaneous political activity in coordination with the 'organic intellectuals' and 'democratic philosophers' who emerge within the struggle.[3] The formation of subaltern autonomous political organizations represents an intermediate phase of conscious leadership in which subaltern groups press for political claims and demands in a collective form. Gramsci considers the formation of a revolutionary party that is capable of uniting and leading subaltern groups and organizations in a hegemonic transformation of the state and civil society as the highest level of subaltern political development. Thus, as Gramsci writes in *Notebook 3*, §48, the 'unity of "spontaneity" and "conscious leadership" or "discipline" is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes.'[4]

In response to the wave of global uprisings that emerged in 2011 in North Africa, Europe and North America, there has been a return to questions of spontaneity and political organization in radical movements, from the embrace of spontaneous self-organization of leaderless, horizontal, rhizomatic organizational structures[5] to the necessity of the reconstitution of the revolutionary political party.[6] Within recent discussions and movements, Gramsci's idea of the political party uniting and leading an alliance of classes and social groups in the transformation of society is often seen as being out of date, prompting the necessity for new organizational forms.[7] In addition, a number of critics have accused Gramsci of 'vanguardism' and 'elitism' for his critical evaluations of spontaneity and common sense.[8] A general criticism is that Gramsci's critique of common sense creates an elitist hierarchy of knowledge and consciousness, and that his emphasis on educating spontaneity through conscious leadership amounts to the 'manipulation' of the people.[9] By not considering the historical context of Gramsci's writings,

such criticisms overlook the limitations of spontaneity that he identifies, and the valorization of common sense over conscious leadership creates an impasse that renders subaltern political transformation nearly impossible.

Through an examination of Gramsci's writings on spontaneity and conscious leadership in his pre-prison writings and the *Prison Notebooks*, this chapter examines his point that it is only through the development of a critical and historical consciousness combined with revolutionary political organization that subaltern groups will be able to overcome their subordination. Gramsci's position, as I will show, is informed by his critical analysis of spontaneous political uprisings throughout Italian history and through reflections on his own political praxis. In contrast to claims of vanguardism, as I will argue, Gramsci's political theory was essentially founded upon the democratic empowerment of subaltern groups. In his writings as a journalist, activist and party leader to his reflections in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci continually returns to the importance of education, culture and organization in the formation of the revolutionary process.[10] In his view, it is precisely through education and organization that subaltern groups will empower themselves, overcome the limits of spontaneity and ultimately act as a collective will in the transformation of their conditions. Through this examination, I will consider the contemporary relevance of Gramsci's writings on spontaneity and political organization with a discussion of Occupy Wall Street and its emerging shift from an act of occupation to permanent organization.

Peasant and worker struggles in Italy

In examining the spontaneous rebelliousness characteristic of the second part of nineteenth-century Italian history, Gramsci noted that the actions of subaltern groups did not break their political subordination or transform their lived conditions in a permanent manner. In the article 'Workers and Peasants,' published in August 1919, Gramsci notes how the nature of uneven capitalist development in Italy and the formation of the modern state created the conditions in which Southern peasants were incapable of defining a systematic strategy for their struggle.[11] In the period following the Risorgimento (1861), Southern agriculture adhered to a more or less feudal economic structure in which the seemingly modern and liberal-democratic state protected the large landowning class. Due to their political exclusion and poor economic conditions, peasants erupted in violent revolts. They engaged in tax strikes,

urban riots, arson, land seizures and occupations. Groups of brigands assassinated officials, mayors, councilors and national guardsmen of the new state. Because of the individualistic nature of the brigandage and revolts, the peasant – in Gramsci's words – was 'incapable of seeing himself as a member of a collectivity,' and because of this, he could not 'wage a systematic and permanent campaign designed to alter the economic and political relations of society.'

> Under such conditions, the psychology of the peasants was inscrutable: their real feelings remained occult, entangled and confused in a system of defence against exploitation that was merely individualist, devoid of logical continuity, inspired largely by guile and feigned servility. Class struggle was confused with brigandage, with blackmail, with burning down woods, with the hamstringing of cattle, with the abduction of women and children, with assaults on the town hall – it was a form of elementary terrorism, without long-term or effective consequences.[12]

The Italian government sent over 100,000 troops to the South to violently suppress the revolts. In the decade after the Risorgimento (1861–71), more people were killed in the suppression of the peasant uprisings and brigandage than in all the wars of independence between 1848 and 1861.[13]

The rise of the workers' movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was also met with brutal repression. In the 1893–4 Fasci Siciliani rebellion, workers and peasants engaged in spontaneous direct political action, with land occupations, demonstrations and confrontations with police, due to deteriorating economic conditions. In response to the popular unrest throughout the island, Prime Minister Francesco Crispi sent 40,000 troops to the island, instituted martial law, dissolved the Socialist Party of Italian Workers, ordered the arrest of its Central Committee and purged the poorest citizens from the voting rolls.[14] Similarly, in 1898 Milan workers demonstrated against rising prices and food shortages, and after troops shot and killed demonstrators, the city erupted in protest with strikes, marches and street occupations. Milan's mayor responded with military repression in which over 250 people were killed and thousands arrested. He dissolved the Milan Chamber of Labor, as well as Socialist electoral groups, and shut down the radical press.[15] In 1906, when Gramsci was 15 years old, his homeland of Sardinia was swept up in violent social upheaval. After soldiers opened fire on a demonstration for lower food prices, wounding 20 people and

killing two, protests spread across the island. People attacked cheese factories, tax offices, company stores, pillaged, damaged machinery and stoned innocent shopkeepers. Soldiers brutally repressed the uprising, shooting at mobs and arresting hundreds of people.[16]

From his youth in Sardinia throughout his career as a journalist and political activist and ultimately to the rise of fascism, Gramsci witnessed the brutal repression of the peasant and workers' movements. His pre-prison writings document many of the spontaneous and direct political activities that occurred in the Italian labor movement and the reactionary responses that followed. As an activist, he consistently rejected strategies that prioritized the revolutionary seizure of power over the cultivation of revolutionary culture.[17] He realized that without the formation of a mass revolutionary movement, dominant social groups would utilize the military and violence to protect their positions and prevent subaltern groups from acquiring political power. In 1919, he wrote: 'If a revolutionary minority were to succeed in violently taking over power, this minority would be overthrown the next day by a counter coup launched by capitalism's mercenary forces, for the uninvolved majority would allow the cream of the revolutionary forces to be massacred.'[18] Because the modern state was founded upon a unity of force and consent, he argued that revolutionary movements required intellectual and moral leadership prior to obtaining political power.

Despite his criticisms, Gramsci did not dismiss spontaneous movements. He simply emphasized their significance, function and limitations in the political process. In his view, the spontaneous worker and peasant uprisings throughout Italian history demonstrated the revolutionary desire of the masses to transform their conditions. As he wrote in the article 'Proletarian Unity,' published in February 1920:

> From the perspective of revolutionary lyricism and of petty-bourgeois morality, these mass manifestations are seen as sublime or grotesque, heroic or barbaric; from the perspective of Marxism, they have to be seen in terms of historical necessity. For communists, they have real value in so far as they reveal among the masses a capacity, the beginnings of a new life, the aspiration to create new institutions and the historical drive to renew human society from the roots upwards.[19]

Throughout his writings, he insists that spontaneous political activity must operate in coordination with conscious leadership, in which the masses understand their activity, their direction and the consequences. The central political objective is for subaltern groups to move from

rebellious political activity to revolutionary activity in which the groups possess the capacity to not only rebel against their unacceptable conditions but possess the knowledge and capacity to transform them.

L'Ordine Nuovo and the factory councils

The founding of the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* was a critical move in the project to develop socialist culture and society. Gramsci and his comrades believed that the socialist movement was something that had to be built politically and culturally, and they saw the journal as an element in that process. The front page of the debut issue, published on May 1, 1919, contained the journal's slogan: 'Educate yourselves because we will need all our intelligence. Agitate yourselves because we will need all our enthusiasm. Organize yourselves because we will need all our strength.'[20] The journal was instrumental in the development of the Turin factory council movement. Throughout 1919, Gramsci wrote articles praising the development of factory councils as democratic organizations of proletarian culture that would provide the necessary political education for workers to become equipped in exercising political power. He viewed the organization of democratic and autonomous workers' associations, social clubs and peasant communities as the basis of workers' democracy and 'the skeleton of the socialist state' that could replace the bourgeois state.[21] Gramsci believed that the spirit of democracy and collaboration fostered in the workplace would provide workers with the education, experience, discipline and permanent structure necessary in founding a democratic workers' state.[22] In his words: 'It is necessary to convince workers and peasants that it is in their interest to submit to a permanent discipline of culture, to develop a conception of the world and the complex and intricate system of human relations, economic and spiritual, that form the social life of the globe.'[23] The point was not merely for workers to understand themselves as wage earners but to understand themselves as producers 'in the process of production, at all levels, from the workshop to the nation and the world.'[24] The *Ordine Nuovo* group, in his words, undertook the development of the factory councils and the study of 'the capitalist factory as a necessary form of the working class, as a political organ, as the "national territory" of workers' self-government.' The purpose was 'to develop the idea of workers' freedom being realized in practice initially in the Factory Council' and then beyond.[25] In this sense, the factory councils functioned as prefigurative political organizations in that they put democratic and socialist values into practice within capitalism as a process of building (prefiguring) the future

socialist society.[26] As Gramsci later wrote in *Notebook 3*, §48, the unity of spontaneity and conscious leadership in the factory council movement 'gave the masses a "theoretical" consciousness of themselves as creators of historical and institutional values, as founders of states.'[27]

The Italian Socialist Party (PSI) didn't support the factory council movement, and the factory councils lacked the organizational capacity to generate wide public support. The *Ordine Nuovo* group itself was accused of being 'spontaneist' and 'voluntarist.'[28] But Gramsci's criticisms of the Party for its lack of support are instructive in revealing his conception of the role of party leadership. In an article entitled 'Toward a Renewal of the Socialist Party,' he criticizes the PSI for its lack of connection and leadership with both peasants and workers, for not informing the public of national and international events that affect the labor movement, for not defining a revolutionary program for a socialist government, for not developing a comprehensive educational campaign to raise the consciousness of Italian workers as producers in the global economy, and for not promoting a 'revolutionary consciousness' among workers.[29] In a scathing section, he states that the Party is disconnected from the reality of the class struggle, its position within it, and is unprepared to assume political power. In his words, 'the Socialist Party should develop a comprehensive action designed to put the whole of the working class in a position to win the revolution, and win it permanently.'[30] In one of his most prophetic moments, he argued that if the Party was unable to capture political power, there would be a violent political reaction by the propertied classes to destroy the labor movement and its organization.

Gramsci's conception of party leadership is also revealed in his writings during the factory occupations of August and September 1920. Throughout Italy more than 400,000 metalworkers occupied their factories due to low wages and poor working conditions. An additional 100,000 workers from other unions seized factories in support of the metalworkers, and millions of others were indirectly involved.[31] The occupations in Turin, which involved over 100,000 workers, revived the operation of the factory councils, and workers in different regions of the country created factory councils similar to those in Turin. Through council organization, workers continued to run the factories, maintaining production, distribution, transportation and trading of raw materials. Some factories also established 'Red Guards' to defend the factories from possible assault.

The factory occupations validated the political importance of the factory councils as democratic organizations, as Gramsci had argued, and the fact that workers were able to resume production and inter-factory

coordination reinforced the point that workers were capable of self-management and self-government. In a series of articles, Gramsci analyzed some of the factors confronting workers during the occupation. In an article that appeared in the Piedmont and Milan editions of *Avanti!*, he warned workers not to delude themselves into thinking that the occupation of the factories by itself would resolve the issue of political power:

> the pure and simple occupation of the factories by the working class, though it *indicates* the extent of the proletariat's power, does not in or of itself produce any new, definitive position. Power remains in the hands of capital; armed force remains the property of the bourgeois State; public administration, the distribution of basic necessities, the agencies disposing of credit, the still intact commercial apparatus all remain under the control of the bourgeois class.[32]

He argued that the occupation of the factories marked a historical event by the working class in the revolutionary movement but that revolution would not be as easy to accomplish as the occupation of undefended factories.

The Italian Socialist Party and the failure of leadership

Although the occupation of the factories was the most significant demonstration of the labor movement in the *biennio rosso* (two red years) of 1919–20, neither the Socialist Party nor the workers' movement were prepared for revolution. By the end of September, unions negotiated pay increases for workers as a resolution to the dispute. The settlement represented a temporary victory for workers in economic terms, but in political terms it signaled the defeat of the revolutionary movement.[33] Workers expressed disappointment and disillusionment with the PSI for circumventing the revolutionary moment, which the workers themselves produced. Gramsci accused the Party of 'demagogic verbalism' for promoting revolution with no capacity of producing it, for generating a political problem and proposing a reformist 'economic solution' to it. In other words, the Party demonstrated a failure of conscious leadership. He criticized the PSI for its inadequate leadership and for its political incoherence, claiming the Party was revolutionary only in words and not in action:

> the Italian Socialist Party is no different from the English Labour Party. It is revolutionary only in terms of the general statements contained

> in its programme. It is a conglomeration of parties. It moves and cannot help but move slowly and belatedly. It runs the permanent risk of becoming an easy prey for adventurers, careerists and ambitious men without political capacity or seriousness. ... It shifts and alters its colors as the masses shift and alter their colors. In fact this Socialist Party, which proclaims itself to be the guide and master of the masses, is nothing but a wretched clerk noting down the operations that the masses spontaneously carry out. This poor Socialist Party, which proclaims itself to be the head of the working class, is nothing but the baggage train of the proletarian army.[34]

The PSI demonstrated its inability to lead. It failed to understand its political mission of establishing a new state, and it failed to lead the people it claimed to represent and from which it drew its support. In Gramsci's words, 'It ought to be the party of "all the workers" and instead it turned out to be the party of "no one."'[35] Until the defeat of the council movement and factory occupations, the young Gramsci, as Carlos Nelson Coutinho has argued, underestimated the role of the political party in the revolutionary process. Gramsci began to see the necessity of political organization beyond the space of the factory, 'encompassing all social, political and cultural institutions that enable the *reproduction* of social life as a whole (including the reproduction of economic production).'[36] Through this experience, Gramsci declared his support for the formation of a communist party and thought it necessary to create a new type of party, capable of politically leading the masses, beyond the narrow corporatist interests of the working class, in the process of creating a socialist state.

Gramsci consistently argued that political transformation could not occur without political organization and conscious leadership, but for such leadership to be successful, it was necessary for workers and peasants to educate themselves and to develop a critical consciousness of their conditions. In November 1923, over a year since the Fascists came into power, Gramsci sent a letter to the Italian journal *Voce della Gioventù,* the official paper of the Communist Youth Federation. The letter was a response to a discussion in the journal on the defeat of the revolutionary movement, and it foreshadows some of the major themes in the *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci argued that one of the main issues contributing to the defeat of the movement was not merely the failure of leadership, since the existence of a 'true revolutionary party' may not have been enough. He argues that the cause of defeat may have been something far deeper than just the failure of leadership. It had to do with the lack of

critical self-awareness of the movement itself. The Italian revolutionary movement did not understand its own position, did not develop a coherent conception of the world, did not disseminate it among the masses, or strengthen the consciousness of its militants. In other words, the revolutionary movement lacked its own culture and critical understanding. Thus, according to Gramsci, it was necessary to start from the beginning and develop that critical self-understanding.

> Here is what the 'beginning' of the working class's task must be. It is necessary to carry out a pitiless self-criticism of our weakness, and to begin by asking ourselves why we lost, who we were, what we wanted, where we wished to go. But there is also something else which must be done first (one always finds that the beginning always has another ... beginning!): it is necessary to fix the criteria, the principles, the ideological basis for our very criticism.[37]

After posing the rhetorical question 'Does the Working Class have its own Ideology?,' he continues:

> Why have the Italian proletarian parties always been weak from a revolutionary point of view? Why have they failed, when they should have passed from words to action? They did not know the situation in which they had to operate, they did not know the terrain on which they should have given battle. ... We do not know Italy. Worse still: we lack the proper instruments for knowing Italy as it really is. It is therefore almost impossible for us to make predictions, to orient ourselves, to establish lines of action which have some likelihood of being accurate. There exists no history of the Italian working class. There exists no history of the peasant class. What was the importance of the 1898 events in Milan? What lesson did they furnish? What was the importance of the 1904 strike in Milan? How many workers know that then, for the first time, the necessity of the proletarian dictatorship was explicitly asserted?[38]

In other words, Gramsci maintained that the working class and peasants lack a critical and historical consciousness of their own existence and of the conditions in which they exist. As he continues in the letter, he asks, 'What is to be done?' and in his answer he posits the importance of education and organization in order to develop strategy for future struggle. 'Here is an immediate task for the groups of friends of the *Voce:* to meet, buy books, organize lessons and discussions on this subject,

form solid criteria for research and study, and criticize the past – in order to be stronger in the future and win.'[39] He essentially expresses the integral connection between theory and practice and the necessity of understanding one's conditions in order to transform them.

This emphasis on understanding one's history echoes the importance Gramsci places on recording the spontaneous and autonomous movements of subaltern groups in his notes on subalternity.[40] He emphasizes the importance of developing an integral history of subaltern groups' autonomous movements and independent initiatives as a way to understand revolutionary movements, as well as a necessary process in the development of critical consciousness. He conceives the development of subaltern groups' critical consciousness as the process of making common sense coherent, what he calls 'good sense.' Gramsci clarifies this idea in his well-known statement in *Notebook 11*, §12 regarding the formation of one's critical consciousness (of 'knowing thyself'), which is prompted by the practical necessity of providing 'conscious direction to one's activity.' He describes this process as making elements of common sense 'more unitary and coherent,' so as to provide 'good sense' to one's activity.[41] The overarching idea is that subaltern groups must develop a critical self-awareness of their socio-political history and previous practice so as to strengthen their intellectual and organizational capacities in the struggle to transform society. In other words, subaltern groups must learn from their history in order to inform the effectiveness of their praxis.

The point of his analysis is to define the elements that will allow subaltern groups to achieve permanent victory in their struggles. As he writes in *Notebook 25*, §2: 'Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only 'permanent' victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately.'[42] The idea of 'permanent victory,' in a critical sense, essentially entails the abolition of subalternity itself which requires the formulation of a new ethico-political foundation of society that disallows the subordination of one group by another. The strategic idea that Gramsci puts forward is that subaltern groups must formulate and develop a new 'conception of the world,' a 'new common sense' and culture that have the capacity to transform society. This process, which Gramsci describes as 'fragmented,' 'episodic' and 'continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups'[43] requires the formation of autonomous subaltern political organizations, such as councils, unions, cultural associations and parties that are capable of confronting the organizations and institutions of ruling social groups. The development of defining a new

ethico-political foundation of society requires a concentrated level of intellectual and moral leadership (i.e. hegemony) in which subaltern groups begin to transform civil society in a mass political movement that is eventually capable of effectively confronting and transforming the coercive apparatuses of the state (political society).[44]

Despite the claims of vanguardism and elitism in his thought, the themes of education and organization appear throughout Gramsci's pre-prison and prison writings. Moreover, in stark contrast to such claims, Gramsci's criticisms of common sense and spontaneity illustrate the radically democratic and critical focus of his analysis, in that he identifies the limitations of subaltern groups' conception of politics and modes of thought in order to improve and strengthen their intellectual and political capacities. He embraced the radical implications of subaltern groups' spontaneous movements, but he also had no illusions that burning down shops, brigandage, praying for change or occupying factories would permanently transform the already existing structures of organized social and political power. At its elementary stages, revolutionary change requires articulating and disseminating a new conception of philosophy and culture that have a critical grounding and provide a national-popular basis that unites the people in a common conception of life and the world. Central to Gramsci's thought is that revolutionary transformation requires the active participation of the masses and not simply their uncritical support. This essentially constitutes the grounding for a radical form of democracy in which the masses play the predominant role in the direction of their lives, communities and political society.

Occupy Wall Street and political organization

Returning to Gramsci's writings on spontaneity and conscious leadership provides insights into rethinking the form and strength of subaltern struggles today. Even though Occupy Wall Street's (OWS) philosophy of organizing a 'leaderless movement' clashes with Gramsci's idea of a political party uniting and leading an alliance of classes and groups in the transformation of society, elements of OWS resemble a Gramscian movement in the struggle for hegemony.[45] The development of OWS can be understood in terms of spontaneity and conscious leadership. What was intended to be an occupation of Wall Street in lower Manhattan on September 17, 2011 spontaneously developed into a political movement across the United States, spreading to more than 750 cities across the globe. Within a matter of weeks, OWS emerged on the political

scene and became one of the most significant leftist political developments in the United States in 40 years. OWS's 60-day occupation in New York can be understood as a success because it generated the Occupy Movement, highlighted the issue of inequality, and changed public discourse, but in the Gramscian sense, OWS can also be understood as a failure, at least in the short term, for it did not transform the existing structures of society. An examination of its strengths and weaknesses can provide insights into what is required for it or a similar movement to develop a sufficient level of organization and leadership to transform society. The emergence of post-Occupy groups after the government's systematic dismantling of Occupy encampments indicates that activists are rethinking the effectiveness of their praxis and questions of power.

OWS emerged within a 'cycle of struggles' of mass protests across the globe that erupted in late 2010 and 2011: the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East, the *indignados* movement in Spain, anti-austerity protests in Europe and South America, and the occupation of the Wisconsin state house in the United States in early 2011.[46] The organization of OWS emerged out of several factors. Following the spirit of the Arab Spring and in response to the mounting socio-economic injustice in the United States, in early June 2011 the Canadian-based culture-jamming, anti-consumer magazine *Adbusters* sent an email to its 90,000 followers stating that 'America needs its own Tahrir,' in reference to the occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt.[47] In July, *Adbusters* called for people to 'flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months,' beginning on September 17.[48] On August 2, a group of approximately 50 *Adbusters* supporters and anarchists attended a rally organized by New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts (NYABC) to discuss the planning of the occupation. Dissatisfied with NYABC's decision-making process and the idea of formulating predetermined demands, the group of anarchists, including anthropologist and activist David Graeber, broke from the rally and created their own meeting, agreeing to use 'horizontal' organizing methods of general assemblies and consensus decision-making processes.[49] The group met weekly throughout August, eventually developing into the New York City General Assembly (GA) which functioned as the governing body of OWS. The GA originally chose One Chase Manhattan Plaza, near Wall Street, as the site of the OWS protest, but police cordoned it off on September 17, prompting organizers to choose Zuccotti Park, a privately owned public space two blocks from Wall Street, as the location of occupation. Even though activists were unable

to occupy and shut down Wall Street, the occupation of Zuccotti Park retained the symbolism of occupying Wall Street.

OWS's focus on inequality and the corruption of money in politics resonated with the public and made a significant impact on political discourse. Following the 2007–8 financial crisis, Americans experienced the effects of austerity, a mortgage crisis, foreclosures, unemployment, rising personal and student debt, massive inequality and disillusionment with the political establishment. A range of intellectuals had previously examined inequality and the class politics of the 1 percent versus the 99 percent in the United States, but OWS's 'We are the 99%' slogan generated widespread attention.[50] It also provided an intervention in common sense understandings of the US economy by introducing elements of good sense into examinations of unequal wealth and power.[51] This opened public discourse to discussions of mass inequality, systemic capitalist crisis and class power, expanding the discussion beyond the confines of liberal explanations of weak regulation, corruption and greed. By early October 2011, an opinion poll indicated that 54% of the public had a favorable view of OWS, compared to 27% for the libertarian-oriented Tea Party.[52] By the end of October, news media increased their coverage of the movement and expanded their discussion of 'economic inequality' by fivefold, extending through 2013.[53] Because OWS appeared to emerge out of nowhere, tapped into the popular discontent among the masses and generated wide public support, it contained the characteristics of a spontaneous movement.

Though OWS altered public discourse and expanded the terrain of radical politics, OWS affected little by way of substantive political change. The conditions that triggered the protest still remain in effect: capitalism was not overthrown, the 1% remains in power, inequality still exists, the masses remain indebted. As Slavoj Žižek explained in an address at Zuccotti Park, the metric for success should be the impact on people's 'normal lives' after the occupation.[54] In terms of changing normal lives, OWS's impact has been minimal. However, as Thomas Frank has argued, a range of Left intellectuals have praised OWS as a success for its tactics, horizontal organization and its ability to raise awareness, but not necessarily for its substantive political effects.[55]

A factor contributing to the difficulty of determining OWS's success and failure is the GA's explicit decision not to formulate demands. The lack of demands demonstrates OWS's commitment to prefigurative politics, but is also representative of the internal divisions among members. Originally *Adbusters* suggested that the occupation of Wall Street follow the model of the Egyptian Revolution in devising a single demand,

similar to Egyptians' demand that 'Mubarak must go.' To determine the single demand, *Adbusters* suggested that occupiers adhere to the 'worldwide shift in revolutionary tactics' derived from 'a fusion of Tahrir with the acampadas of Spain':

> The beauty of this new formula, and what makes this novel tactic exciting, is its pragmatic simplicity: we talk to each other in various physical gatherings and virtual people's assemblies … we zero in on what our one demand will be, a demand that awakens the imagination and, if achieved, would propel us toward the radical democracy of the future … and then we go out and seize a square of singular symbolic significance and put our asses on the line to make it happen.[56]

As a possible demand, *Adbusters* suggested 'that Barack Obama ordain a Presidential Commission tasked with ending the influence money has over our representatives in Washington.' Many protestors rejected the idea of formulizing demands, based upon a commitment to direct democracy and the prefigurative principle of 'building the new society in the shell of the old.'[57] Graeber, for instance, argued that 'issuing demands means recognizing the legitimacy – or at least the power – of those of whom the demands are made.'[58] In this sense, demands are essentially reformist, and for many anarchists 'the occupation is its own demand' which is captured in the slogan 'Occupy Everything, Demand Nothing.' In this sense, as Joshua Clover explains: 'Occupation is the tactic. Demandlessness is a strategy.'[59]

Some scholars have argued that the lack of demands has been a source of the movement's strength, opening an inclusive space for both reformist and radical views, and expanding the size of the movement.[60] Indeed, OWS was made up of a range of liberals, progressives and anarchists. Some wanted to destroy capitalism, and others wanted to reform it.[61] The horizontal organization of the general assembly allowed these divergent views to remain joined but without a definitive collective will. The creation of separate working groups, such as Demands, Queering OWS and Occupy the SEC (Securities and Exchange Commission) gave activists autonomy to follow their separate interests and objectives. In some ways the lack of collective demands and the organization of divergent working groups can be seen as a sign of 'the weak ideological core of the movement,' as Jodi Dean and Marco Deseriis have argued.[62] Without collective demands or goals, OWS's effectiveness can be interpreted in a number of ways. For instance, for some Occupy the SEC's influence in the writing of the Volker Rule regulations included in the Dodd–Frank

Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act is a victory,[63] but for others, such as Mark Bray, the goal was never about the Volker Rule or reforming Wall Street. The goal was '[t]he destruction of capitalism and the construction of a classless, environmentally sustainable, democratic economy characterized by mutual aid and solidarity that prioritizes the fulfillment of human need.'[64]

Given that OWS captured the public's attention, the request for demands was a question of leadership in creating another world. In many ways, the lack of demands represents the political incoherence of the movement in presenting an alternative conception of the world beyond the critique of the existing system and the prefigurative politics of horizontalism as the method of organizing the occupation. The principle of developing an agenda, a vision and demands out of the process of protest itself reinforces the spontaneous aspects of OWS, placing more emphasis on democratic, yet spontaneous, processes than on conscious leadership.

Following Gramsci's analysis of conscious leadership, subaltern struggles require a molding of both prefigurative politics – of building new forms of community – with a strategic politics of developing formal organizations that are capable of achieving structural transformation. It is in this sense that Gramsci saw the mass party, composed of an alliance of classes and groups, as the collective will of political transformation. Though OWS is an explicitly leaderless and partyless movement,[65] it represents the formation of a party in embryonic form, as Dean has argued.[66] It was able to bring together diverse groups as a 'collective subject' that sought to fundamentally transform politics. It was able to effectively communicate a sustained critique of the existing order through language, slogans, and practices. It functioned as a collective intellectual in educating organizers and participants in the process of building consensus. It claimed to represent the 99% of the population, and it attempted to lead the United States in a new political direction.

One of the major lessons that can be drawn from OWS and Occupy, following a Gramscian analysis, is the state's readiness to utilize surveillance, the use of force and coercion to disrupt and suppress an explicitly nonviolent political movement. Several reports reveal the various coordinated efforts among the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, US mayors, local police and private security personnel to monitor, strategically incapacitate and ultimately raid and dismantle Occupy encampments across the country in mid-November 2011.[67] The Protest and Assembly Rights Project, sponsored by the Global Justice Clinic at NYU School of Law and the Walter Loiter International Human Rights

Clinic at Fordham Law School, conducted an eight-month-long study of New York City's response to OWS.[68] The report concluded that the city's response constituted 'a complex mapping of protest suppression,' in which it violated US and international law, infringed upon citizens' rights of expression and assembly, and obstructed the freedom of the press.[69] The police used excessive, unnecessary and aggressive force against peaceful protestors, as well as against bystanders, legal observers and journalists, causing both minor and serious physical injuries.[70] Police also made numerous mass and arbitrary arrests of protestors, journalists and bystanders. In a ten-month period, police across the country arrested more than 7,000 Occupy protestors, at a time when the federal government's prosecution of economic crimes reached a 20-year low.[71] The state's response to the Occupy Movement not only constitutes a 'strategic incapacitation' of protest,[72] it produces a chilling effect on peaceful protest itself, dissuading people from exercising their civil liberties due to the fear of violence and legal punishment. In effect, the governmental response demonstrates the potential threat Occupy posed to the status quo and reveals the state's real political allegiances. From a Gramscian perspective, this is one of the reasons why subaltern political movements require the formation of both autonomous and formal organizations operating in different socio-political spaces, so as to simultaneously present a prefigurative politics and the contestation of state power.

In the aftermath of the systematic dismantling of the occupations and encampments, members of the Occupy movement have rethought questions of organizational power in second-generation sub-movements and Occupy-related projects that follow alternative tactics. For instance, Strike Debt targets the predatory debt system through the organization of debt resisters and by buying up debt at reduced rates to ultimately abolish it. In October 2012, Occupy Sandy distributed food, clothing and other supplies, and raised over $1 million to assist victims of Hurricane Sandy and aid rebuilding efforts in New York and New Jersey. Occupy Homes, which is active in a number of states, assists homeowners who have lost or are about to lose their homes due to foreclosure by occupying foreclosed homes, organizing public pressure campaigns and organizing neighborhoods. Other groups have focused on political education and training. Rockaway Wildfire, which was organized by members of Occupy Sandy and OWS, launched the Wildfire Project to train people in organizing and canvasing, direct action, public speaking, and social media.[73] In 2012, 99% Spring, which is composed of a coalition of 60 organizations, including those that work with working class

and communities of color, launched a campaign to train 100,000 people in nonviolent direct action with the goal of facilitating a wave of action targeting corporations and public officials.[74]

Conclusion

The critical examination of OWS's organizational power and effectiveness after the state's dismantling of the encampments may present new ways for the Occupy Movement to challenge power in a sustained way. OWS presented a critique of the given society and maintained the organization of the occupation according to prefigurative and horizontalist principles, but beyond calling for the occupation of everything, it failed to present a vision of how the form of the new society would supersede the old. Prefigurative and spontaneous movements are often confined to their own immediacy with minimal intervention in the wider structures of power or retreating from politics altogether in self-managing organizations.[75] OWS's commitment to prefigurative politics was limited by its practical and logistical embeddedness within the existing structures of society in that it relied on goods and services produced and distributed through capitalist relations.[76] This suggests that occupation as a tactic of protest is limited to its symbolic and communicative effects if it is not tied to a struggle of socio-political transformations that affects people's 'normal lives.' The post-Occupy organizations discussed above are attempting to do precisely that, even if limited by their scope and capacities.

In Gramsci's analysis, subaltern political struggles require a form of conscious leadership that connects the spontaneous elements of the struggle with long-term political objectives which, for Gramsci, is ultimately the transformation and withering away of the state. Whereas many anarchist and autonomist Marxist currents reject the strategic struggle of achieving state power, in Gramsci's analysis the effectiveness of prefigurative formations, which anarchists and autonomist Marxists support, will be limited without addressing the power of the state and its use of force. Many activists in the Occupy Movement have begun to address the question of power and political effectiveness. For instance, in reflecting on OWS and the post-Occupy charitable work, Strike Debt organizer Astra Taylor notes: 'We're pretty good at spectacle, we're pretty damn good at charity. We're good at constructive action. The real interesting question is the question of power and how you have that.'[77] Echoing a Gramscian idea, Yotam Marom, who was active in OWS from the early planning stage, writes: 'Ultimately, the key is

power – recognizing and contesting it in our enemies, building it for ourselves, taking it from those who oppress and exploit, using it to transform ourselves and the values and institutions of our society. Winning matters.'[78] Similarly, Mary Clinton, a labor organizer who participated in planning OWS, questions the limits of the anti-political nature of prefigurative institutions and how they can facilitate broader political change: '[H]ow do we develop alternatives that don't just withdraw from the system, but that build power – how do we build those institutions so that we can support the alternative?'[79] Building that type of power, in Gramscian terms, is essentially a hegemonic project that requires the articulation of a new conception of the world, as well as the formation of political organizations, cultural associations and a mass political party that are capable of confronting the power of ruling social groups and governing institutions. What this suggests is a synthesis of prefigurative and strategic politics that includes democratizing the institutions of civil society as well as the apparatuses of political society (the state, juridical institutions, etc.). This critical examination and reorganization of OWS to address its strengths, weaknesses and forms of organization in order to become more effective and to ultimately win is certainly in the spirit of Gramscian thinking, though perhaps not in name.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Mark McNally and Dan Skinner for comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

Notes

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