

Looking for literary tools to support your occupation?

AK Press recommends these great books:

- ★ *Anarchism and its Aspirations*, by Cindy Milstein
- ★ *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, by David Graeber
- ★ *Uses of a Whirlwind: Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States*, edited by Team Colors
- ★ *Revolt & Crisis in Greece: Between a Present Yet to Pass and a Future Still to Come*, edited by Occupied London
- ★ *Dancing with Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America*, by Ben Dangel
- ★ *Signs of Change: Contemporary Social Movements, 1960s to now*, edited by Josh MacPhee and Dara Greenwald
- ★ *Conquest of Bread*, by Peter Kropotkin
- ★ *Autonomy, Solidarity, Possibility: The Colin Ward Reader*
- ★ *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt
- ★ *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America*, by Louis Adamic
- ★ *Come Hell or High Water: A Handbook on Collective Process Gone Awry*, by Richard Singer and Delfina Vanucci
- ★ *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, by David Graeber
- ★ *Wall Street: How It Works and For Whom*, by Doug Henwood
- ★ *Take Back the Land*, by Max Rameau
- ★ *Revolt on Goose Island: The Chicago Factory Takeover and What It Says About the Economic Crisis*, by Kari Lydersen
- ★ *ABCs of the Economic Crisis: What Working People Need to Know*, by Michael D. Yates and Fred Magdoff
- ★ *Field Guide to the U.S. Economy*, by Jonathan Teller-Elsberg, Nancy Folbre, and James Heintz
- ★ *Field Guide to the Global Economy*, by John Cavanagh and Sarah Anderson
- ★ *Great Financial Crisis*, by Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster
- ★ *Parecon: Life After Capitalism*, by Michael Albert

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This pamphlet is a project of the AK Press Tactical Media Squad.

<http://revolutionbythebook.akpress.org>

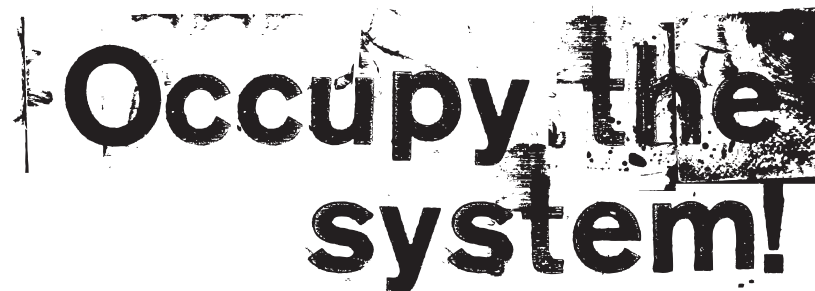


@narchy
&
#occupy



@narchy
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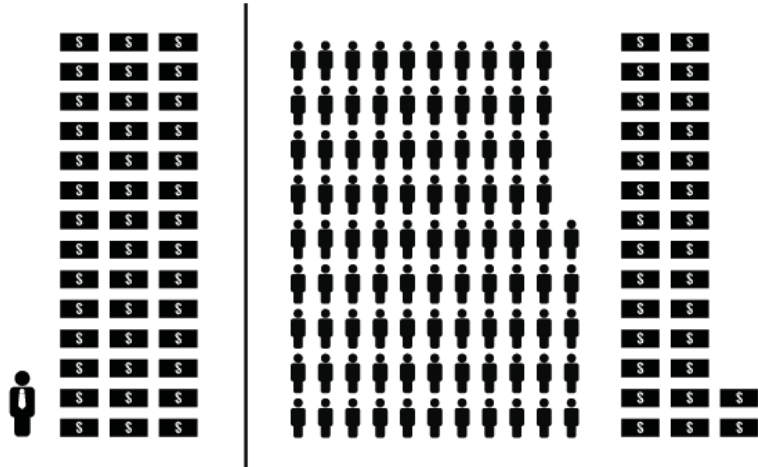
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Occupy the
system!

Essays by Jeffrey St. Clair & Joshua Frank
Team Colors
Eric Laursen
Deric Shannon
& the AK Press Collective

a project of the ak press tactical media squad 



THE TOP 1% OWN 42% OF AMERICAN WEALTH - MORE THAN THE BOTTOM 95% COMBINED



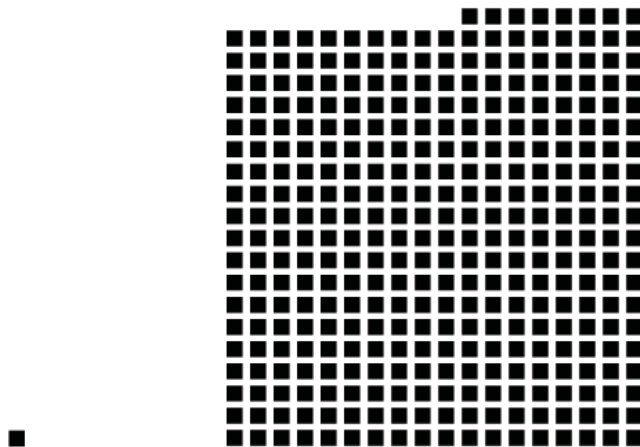
we might want to start valuing the accumulation of freedom instead of commodities. We might look at our social systems and realize that they don't "work." We can consciously create alternatives through mass refusals. And, importantly, this extends far beyond economics into all spheres of life—challenging the very separations that make social domination possible.

This, I believe, is at the heart of the anarchist project. We might advance an "economics" that looks nothing like the way the discipline is currently organized—demolishing the myths of capitalism instead of peddling them as the priests of the dominant market religion. And we might advance a form of social organization that doesn't resemble an "economy" in the conventional sense of the term, but allows for the conscious creation of our everyday lives instead of the compulsory labor we're told is necessary for a system that "works," but obviously doesn't. ★

Notes

- 1 See <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>
- 2 See <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>

Deric Shannon is co-editor of Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Reader of Anarchism in the Academy (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor of the forthcoming The Accumulation of Freedom: Anarchist Writings on Anarchist Economics (AK Press, January 2012).



AVERAGE CEO PAY IS 350 TIMES AVERAGE WORKER PAY - THE HIGHEST RATIO OF ALL TIME



ethic of competition; the organic needs and desires of people instead of the production of so much useless shit that we are conditioned to want by a multi-billion dollar advertising industry? We would likely have an entirely different view of “human nature” and the ways we organize to meet our desires wouldn’t resemble the sick society we have inherited and currently (allow ourselves to) live in.

But the other component really troubles me. When people raise these objections, what do they mean by a “system” that “works”? Can we really say that the state and capitalism—the institutions that largely organize our economic life—“work”? Before this “crisis” even started, 80% of the world’s population lived on less than ten dollars a day (this is evidence that for most of the world, capitalism is always a crisis).¹ Is that a system that “works”? We produce enough food to feed everyone in the world. Yet, one in seven people around the world go hungry.² Is that a system that “works”? This crisis in capitalism certainly isn’t new either—indeed, capitalism is prone to periodic crises where people are thrown into the kinds of social turmoil we’re seeing the world over regularly. This crisis isn’t a new development, it’s a part of how capitalism functions. Is that a system that “works”? Is a system where some people own four summer homes, twenty cars, home theatres, have maids, cooks, and coteries while entire countries largely live in poverty a system that is “working”? Are two world wars that killed more people in them than every war ever fought in human history up to that moment combined reflective of a system that “works”? Is the commodification—the thingification—of the entire non-human world, the destruction of landbases, the regular extinction of entire species, decreasing biodiversity, global warming—all of which are part and parcel of an economic system predicated on constant growth—is this a system that “works”? Is a world where oppression is a social norm that mixes together with economic exploitation one that “works”? Just how brainwashed has the human population become that so many of us believe we need these unequal, unethical, horrific institutional arrangements in order to get by? When mass media ownership is nearly entirely concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy corporations, when capitalism’s best friend—the state—sets the curriculum standards for our compulsory education (setting the stage for the boredom and banality of a life of work for most of us) is it any wonder we’ve swallowed these lies?

The occupiers the world over know that something is wrong and needs fixed. They know that these systems we live under aren’t eternal and must change. But not all changes are equal. And if we want them to be lasting,

Things are getting really weird around here.

In hundreds of cities people are finding their voice. And we are all listening. Has the inequality gap just become too intolerable—especially to those 99% who see only a future of mindless toil and crippling debt? Is the democratic system as we know it “broken”? Is it time to repeal corporate personhood as codified into law? Are taxing the rich and dismantling portions of the financial services sector enough to help restore dignity in our lives? Or do we want the works...?

It’s times like these that put ideas to the test. The radically egalitarian veneer of the Occupy movement makes us anarchists a bit giddy. General Assemblies coast to coast, and not a vanguard party in sight. (And on the 125th Anniversary of the Haymarket Affair!) Strangers meet as equals, work on common goals, and pursue tough discussions about issues that distance allows to fester. It’s like a national teach-in on capitalist economics, governance, class, and other vital topics not usually uttered in polite society. It’s also gritty and frustrating at times, but it all feels **REAL**, doesn’t it?

There’s a lot of serious, strategic decisions to be made in the coming weeks and months, and as movement publishers, it’s our job to try and provide the resources we need to make those sorts of difficult decisions. So we reached out to friends far and wide and assembled the reflections here, and in the pamphlets that will soon follow this one. First up, a spirited reminder from Jeffrey St. Clair and Joshua Frank on who the Democrats are and why this movement can’t give them an inch. Next, Team Colors reminds us that while the Occupy movement’s populist and meteoric beginnings are inspiring, there’s a well-worn path it treads on. Eric Laursen compares and contrasts our moment with the last great era of mass movements in the US—the post-Depression 1930s—and lays out a cautionary tale for those desperate souls who consider turning to the State for solutions in this crisis. And then we come to the issue of capitalism. Some want to reform capitalism and others, like us, are ready to scrap it. Deric Shannon critiques those who intend to remove the “bad apples” because capitalism “works,” while presenting a defense of an economics grounded from anarchist theory and practice.

The writings and recommended readings included in this pamphlet expand our intellectual horizons as we collectively ponder the fate of this country’s people and those outside its borders. Let’s talk about a self-managed society, unburdened by capitalism and financiers. Perhaps you do want the works. And AK Press wants you to have them.

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Don't Protest, Resist: Occupy the System

Jeffrey St. Clair and Joshua Frank

There is an anger running rampant across the country. Some on the right are calling it class warfare. People are enraged. Jobs are scarce, the rich continue to get richer while the poor continue to struggle to make ends meet. Indeed, it should be classified as economic warfare, Americans are sick and tired of being pushed around. It is time to shove back.

Herman Cain is right. The problem resides in the White House. Herman Cain is wrong. The problem resides on Wall Street. They are, in fact, the same problem: a goutish economic system that enriches the wealthy and impoverishes everyone else, a system that pillages the natural world and tramples on basic human liberties, a system that treats corporations as people and people as commodities.

The victims of neoliberal economics are easy to spot. So too are the perpetrators and profiteers of privatized markets. In many ways the occupations sprouting up around the country remind us of the outpouring of opposition to the WTO that jammed up the streets of Seattle in the late-1990s. Like that organic movement, the current protests are grassroots, and fueled, not by overt political motivations, but by a sense of justice.

Like the Battle for Seattle, Occupy America is taking place during a time when a Democrat resides in the White House. There is little question that President Clinton recklessly pursued a free trade agenda that endangered the American workforce and ravaged the environment. But today President Obama's motivations are a bit more cavalier. While he speaks of job creation and jumpstarting the struggling economy, he simultaneously ensures his pals on Wall Street that their power and profits will remain intact.

President Clinton, like his predecessor, is largely responsible for the dire economic situation we now face. It was Clinton and his Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin that pushed for increased deregulation, which ended up shifting jobs, and entire industries, overseas.

Rubin even pushed for Clinton's dismantling of Glass-Steagall, testifying that deregulating the banking industry would be good for capital gains, as well as Main Street. "[The] banking industry is fundamentally different

And these problems intersect with other hierarchies and structural inequalities. That is, our economic system and our work lives are also intimately tied together with sexism; creating and maintaining a social world designed for the "able" bodied; racism and colonialism; strictly policed and confining notions of sexuality and gender; and so on. We also experience these hierarchies in our everyday lives and they are felt, as individuals, in vastly different ways depending on the constellations of identity that we've been assigned, historical and cultural context, etc.

Again, anarchists typically reject these things as necessary for human social organization. Rather, humans would flourish in a world without structured inequalities, such as those that arise from racism, capitalism, the state, sexism, heteronormativity, and so on.

To speak to some of the immediate concerns of the Occupy movement, where crisis, austerity, and poverty are prime motivating factors, anarchism offers some alternatives. Since we are the ones who reproduce this world in our everyday lives, we are also capable of refusing to do so anymore. And we could organize our social world in vastly different ways. We could create a world that isn't designed for work, boredom, and banality—exploitation, oppression, and control. Rather, we could make a world predicated on our active participation in creating our lives, rather than that content being decided for us by a tiny, elite group.

Ironically, one of the near-constant criticisms of these sorts of ideas goes something like this:

"That kind of system would never work because of human nature. We're just wired to be greedy. It's evolution, survival of the fittest, and all that."

There are two components of these (sometimes exasperating) arguments. The "human nature" part should be fairly easy to dispense with. Clearly humans are capable of all sorts of behaviors. If we were "wired" to be greedy, there wouldn't be human moments of compassion, cooperation, and mutual aid (something one famous anarchist, Peter Kropotkin, wrote a bit about in his studies of evolutionary theory). However, when we live under institutions founded on the accumulation of wealth—of things—we tend to make judgments about "human nature" that reflect those institutions. What might we say about "human nature" in a society founded on cooperation instead of survival-of-the-fittest; mutual aid instead of an

What Do We Mean By “Works”? Anarchist Economics and the Occupy X Movement

Deric Shannon

“If you have a lot of money, I feel bad for you son. I got 99 problems, being rich ain’t one.”

—A dynamic FB duo

There’s a lot of folks taking to the streets (and a Park) in the capitol of capital right now—Wall Street—and all over the world in response. The general sentiment seems to be that folks are fed up with a tiny elite controlling the lives of the rest of us—now on an unprecedented scale. This is made possible, in part, by a system of economics and government designed to enrich a few folks at the expense of the majority of us. That is, the social systems we’ve collectively built, and that we collectively maintain and reproduce, allow for this state of affairs.

Anarchists, however, typically suggest that structural inequalities of all kinds are unnecessary impediments to human freedom and social organization. These inequalities and hierarchies exist on an institutional level—we live under institutions such as capitalism and the state that divvy up access to power and resources based on any number of factors, but centralize control in the hands of elites. And these inequalities show up in, indeed create much of, our everyday lives.

Most of us spend our lives working for someone else—either directly or indirectly. Some of us have bosses where we work to enrich a few owners and have to rent ourselves out for a wage or salary so we can have access to the things everyone needs in order to live decent and dignified lives. Some of us can afford a few gadgets on top of that, but it doesn’t change the nature of the social relationship. Some work in co-ops and have a bit more say-so in the workplace, but they’re still slaves to capital and the pressures of living in a market economy. Still others work behind the scenes and are (typically, though not always) wageless, helping to reproduce those social relations. I’m talking here of child-rearing, housekeeping, emotional care, and other tasks that allow a workforce to exist and without which our social world would simply not function. Yet others are on the dole/welfare/social assistance—many are desperately trying to find work and a few others are avoiding work (because, let’s be honest here, work sucks).

from what it was two decades ago, let alone in 1933,” Rubin testified before the House Committee on Banking and Financial Services in May of 1995.

“[Glass-Steagall could] conceivably impede safety and soundness by limiting revenue diversification,” Rubin argued.

While the industry saw much deregulation over the years preceding Clintontime, the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act of 1999, which eliminated Glass-Steagall, extended and ratified changes that had been enacted with previous legislation. Ultimately, the repeal of the New Deal era protection allowed commercial lenders like Rubin’s Citigroup to underwrite and trade instruments like mortgage backed securities along with collateralized debt and established structured investment vehicles (SIVs), which purchased these securities. In short, as the lines were blurred among investment banks, commercial banks and insurance companies, when one industry fell—like mortgage lenders—others could too.

What Clinton began, President Bush only escalated with an extreme capitalist vigor. Alan Greenspan stayed as head of the Federal Reserve, continuing to press forward with his libertarian agenda of deregulation and damaging austerity measures. When Greenspan retired, Ben Bernanke, another Wall Street ally, took the Bank’s helm, and was kept in place by President Obama.

Obama wasted little time bailing out the greed-infested financial sector. When Obama took office he in 2009 he nominated Rubin-trained economist Timothy Geithner, former president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, to serve as Treasury Secretary. Geithner, if anything, is an insider among insiders and Wall Street’s main man in DC.

It was certainly not the hope and change Obama supporters had voted for, especially in a time when the economy was suffering and jobs were scarce. Obama’s modest stimulus program did little to sustain job growth and was nowhere near the scale of the New Deal’s robust Works Progress Administration. In short, Obama has been an economic disaster for the majority of Americans, sans the Wall Street crowd that continues to profit and is protected under the guise of “too big to fail.”

Did you really expect something different from the man who begged Joe Lieberman to serve as his mentor in the senate?

It's this entrenched, systematic refusal to challenge the status quo that is driving the animosity and outrage across the country. Wall Street is being upheld and indeed enabled by both the Democrats and Republicans, including, at the top of the stinking pile, President Obama and his administration.

The Democrats are a prosthetic party, a hollow shell for the detritus of New Deal liberalism, that maintains popular allegiance through blind inertia. For the past thirty years at least, the Democrats have functioned less as a political party driven by a tangible ideology than as a low-fat franchise of Wall Street and defense contractors. From war to neoliberal economics, the new Democrats have pursued brutal policies, often inflicted most grievously at the party's most devoted constituents: Hispanics, blacks, labor and the unemployed.

There's a Wilsonian quality to Obama: trim, aloof, pedantic and shank-you-in-the-back dangerous. Obama has never wanted to be seen socializing with the poor or working class stiff. He doesn't even want them in his orbit, except as props behind his teleprompter. In his first three years in office, the closest the president came to such a pedestrian parlay was his famous beer summit with the Cambridge cop who manhandled Henry Louis Gates. Come to think of it, that meeting was a twofer, since it was also one of Obama's few close encounters with a voice from black America as well.

Making the connection between the continued economic disparities on Main Street and the policies that fuel this divide is paramount to bringing about real change. As such, it's time to Occupy Washington and make this, not only an electoral issue, but also a very real threat to our government's consolidated power.

Obama's first term has revealed the utter vacuity of our political system and the prodigious level of corruption eating away at the sinews of the empire. Democracy itself is being degraded. From bank bailouts and war to indemnification of corporate criminals and assassination orders against American citizens, the most urgent matters of government are now hatched without public debate in the secret chambers of power. The majestic hypocrisy of the Democrats in a time of deepening economic and environmental crisis has inflamed the spectrum of outrage now sweeping America. But where does the movement go from here?

The implicit threat: if Washington doesn't change its ways, it will lose its last shred of political legitimacy. At that point, all bets are off. Perhaps we'll finally see the crackdown by a right-wing military government that some of us have long feared, in our darkest moments. Perhaps the Democratic Party can again find a Rooseveltian figure to relegitimize the system. Or, perhaps, the way will be cleared for solutions that move beyond the State. If that's to happen, the various parts of Occupy Wall Street must work to push decision-making down to the most basic levels: neighborhoods improvising responses to foreclosures and urban decline, communities of color seeking to disentangle themselves from the exploitative economic arrangements they've had to endure, activists seeking to keep basic public services from being scuttled, workers seeking to restart or replace industries that have been downsized and offshored.

The future is unwritten, of course, and Occupy Wall Street shouldn't get into the business of composing it ahead of time. It's disappointing, then, to see that some members have been pushing a plan of action that would culminate in the formation of a third party to run candidates in the 2014 elections—effectively, offering the movement's services to the effort to relegitimize the system, at the certain cost of the movement's own legitimacy. It's also too bad that some think the movement needs an "Executive Committee" to guide its steps. It's not the 1930s anymore. The way forward isn't to save the system, or to mimic it, but to keep it off balance—for good. ★

Eric Laursen is an independent scholar and journalist, and the author of the forthcoming The People's Pension: The Struggle to Defend Social Security Since Reagan (AK Press, April 2012).

trusted to administer and enforce their provisions. In a complex industrial society, working people needed a powerful ally against the owners of capital. Any politics practiced outside the State, or without regard for it, seemed, increasingly, to be futile.

Our world today is very different. America is deindustrializing. Even workers who once had comfortable jobs are being forced back into a more ruthless economic order—by the owners of capital, in collaboration with Washington lawmakers. Yet, in contrast to the mass movements of the 1930s, Occupy Wall Street has issued ... no demands at all. Why not?

The 2008 Wall Street bailouts were merely the latest in a series of disillusioning events, stretching back to the Vietnam War and Watergate and including the various laws and treaties eroding the status of U.S. workers, that have gradually eroded Americans' sense of personal connection with the State as well. Activism in our time takes such forms as the mass direct actions against corporate-friendly global trade deals several years ago, which were organized horizontally and independent of "mainstream" political parties or pressure groups. Occupy Wall Street follows more or less the same pattern, organized by people who largely have no desire to participate in traditional electoral politics.

The public's souring attitude toward the State even pops up on the right. Before it was co-opted by the Republican Party, the Tea Party uprising that began in 2009 was at least partially inspired by a misplaced outrage over Washington's response to the financial crash. Scratch a right-wing "patriot" hard enough and he or she generally stands revealed as having little or no respect left for government—except, possibly, the military. Everybody, it seems, is at least a bit of an anarchist now.

This turning away from the State is something to build on. So it makes perfect sense that Occupy Wall Street hasn't issued a set of demands, for two reasons. First, relatively few activists are under the illusion that Washington, thoroughly in thrall to Wall Street and the Republican right, will listen. Second, because however radical or groundbreaking they might be, the movement's demands would only provide grounds for an already scornful media and political establishment to pigeonhole it as being the proxy for one or another "interest group." As long as it doesn't issue demands, Occupy Wall Street—like the Egyptian uprising in Tahrir Square—keeps its options open and places the onus on the State to guess what the people really want.

The 99% movement needs to forsake protest for a sustained resistance and disruption of the status quo. After all, the object isn't reform—we're far, far beyond that—but radical, systemic change. Its structure should remain enigmatic, diffuse, protean—too slippery to be captured and co-opted by Democrats looking to hijack its momentum. In order to maintain its integrity and political power, the 99% movement must publicly shun any perilous alliance with Democratic front groups such as MoveOn and the Sierra Club. It should reject the coruscated cant of faux leftists like Bernie Sanders and Rachel Maddow and instead give full-voice to the intrinsic rage of the outsiders, the disenfranchised and destitute, the left behind, the new American preterite.

It's time for the nation to begin to hear the spooky vibrations of a home-grown and leaderless movement on the march, a swarming mass of discontent that will make the financial aristocrats and their low-rent political grifters tremble in their sleep.

Let's run the bastards out of town. ★

It's not too cool to be ridiculed
But you brought this upon yourself
The world is tired of pacifiers
We want the truth and nothing else

And we are sick and tired of hearing your song
Telling how you are gonna change right from wrong
'Cause if you really want to hear our views
"You haven't done nothing"!

—Stevie Wonder, "You Haven't Done Nothing"

Joshua Frank and Jeffrey St. Clair are the co-editors of Red State Rebels: Tales of Grassroots Resistance from the Heartland (AK Press, 2008), and the forthcoming Hopeless: Barack Obama and the Politics of Illusion (AK Press, April 2012).

Lions After Slumber: Reflections on a Still-Emerging Struggle

Team Colors Collective

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable NUMBER!
Shake your chains to earth, like dew
Which in sleep had fall'n on you:
YE ARE MANY—THEY ARE FEW.
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, “The Masque of Anarchy: A Poem”

More than once those who have the least defenses against the violence of the powerful have dared to defy that power, dared to confront that violence, with their own. And, more than once, those with the most meager resources to resist oppression have won something important, as the result of that confrontation. And in every instance, it has never been who is the leader but rather who are the people. It has never been what is the organization but what is the crisis.

—June Jordan, *Some of Us Did NOT Die*

It is Shelley’s anguish, written in the aftermath of the massacre of demonstrators calling for reforms at Peterloo in 1819. It is Jordan’s amazement, reflecting on the spontaneous riots in Miami upon Arthur McDuffie’s death at the hands of police officers in 1980 (as with 1968, Rodney King, Oscar Grant...). Then, as now, the commoners are rising after slumber against the chains that bond them. Occupy Movement is “incoherent,” goes the oft-repeated critique. A multitude of screams against seemingly endless injustices, channeled into specific sites of intensity that overwhelm as much as inspire: this is incoherence at its most brilliant, struggle at its most creative and open. It is the nascent struggle—the lion stretching its form in a full-bodied yawn, testing its power, scanning the horizon.

In the wake of a still-emerging struggle, we in the Team Colors Collective want to offer some context, questions, and critical points that we hope will be useful. But we do so out of the recognition that this struggle is still very young; that it continues to draw in more voices and conversations, of which ours is but one small addition; and that those on the ground are feeling both exhilaration and exhaustion. So we offer these words in the spirit of careful reflection, of constant listening, of humility, of gentleness.

activists in major cities kept homeowners and tenants from being evicted by banks. Consumers banded together against price-gouging retailers. In Arkansas, desperately hungry people forced Red Cross officials at gunpoint to give out food after the Hoover administration ordered it withheld.

We’ve seen nothing of the sort—yet—from either labor or the activists composing Occupy Wall Street, although some Wisconsin unions briefly discussed the idea of a general strike after their Republican governor attacked public employees’ collective bargaining rights last year. Another thing that was different about the mass resistance that the Great Depression inspired, however, was the demands the people put forward.

Popular movements, looking for solutions that the politicians seemed uninterested in finding, got behind proposals that made Washington quiver in fear. Take old-age relief.

There was no such thing as retirement in the 1930s, and after the Depression hit, some two-thirds of persons over sixty-five were unemployed. Millions of people from all parts of the country organized behind a series of populist plans that would provide a guaranteed income for the elderly, paid for directly by raising taxes on the rich. The Roosevelt administration, greatly concerned, pushed through its own plan for old-age pensions, which in 1935 became the Social Security Act. But whereas the three leading populist plans started from the assumption that an adequate income in retirement was a human right, workers only become eligible for Social Security by paying a payroll tax. In other words, you had to prove your worthiness by working. And whereas the populists would have redistributed income from rich to poor to pay for pensions, Social Security financed them with a payroll tax that fell more heavily on low-income workers.

Over the next several decades, the program was made more generous and more widely available. But since Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980, pressure has mounted from the right to drastically curtail or even phase out Social Security. Just this summer, Obama shocked Democrats by offering a major reduction in the benefit formula in exchange for higher taxes. Fortunately for retirees, present and future, the Republicans said no.

The trajectory of Social Security says a lot about how the response to today’s economic crisis differs from yesterday’s—and how the potential solutions differ as well. As radical as the three populist pension proposals of the 1930s were for their time, their supporters believed the State could be

Keeping the System Off Balance: Lessons for Occupy Wall Street from the Mass Movements of the Depression Era

Eric Laursen

Millions of working-class and middle-class unemployed, with little prospect of a return to their previous standard of living. Big business and high finance engaged in a shattering round of consolidation, downsizing, and wage-cutting. A government apparatus unwilling to challenge the economic orthodoxies demanding that it do, essentially, nothing to interfere with the natural workings of the sanctified Free Market.

You could fill a mainframe with the similarities between the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Great Recession that commenced in 2007–08. So, too, with the sights and sounds that followed. In 1932, there was the dramatic sight of the Bonus Army—43,000 World War I veterans, their families and friends, down to their last dimes, encamped on the National Mall in Washington, petitioning Congress to grant them a “bonus” payment that just might help keep body and soul together. In 2011, we have not one Bonus Army but hundreds, all over the world, starting with the Occupy Wall Street action that began September 17.

But some things have changed. The Bonus Army were brutally evicted from the capital on one morning in July by troops led by those future war heroes, Douglas MacArthur and Dwight Eisenhower. Likewise threatened with eviction, Occupy Wall Street supporters succeeded in jamming New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s phone lines on October 13, persuading that particular Wall Street billionaire that he’d do better to leave them alone—for the time being. Thus does the State refine its means of persuasion to meet the requirements of the Internet Age.

The differences between then and now run deeper. The economic plight of working people was far scarier in 1932—no social safety net to speak of and one in four out of work, compared with one in 10 in 2011. But if you happened to be a Wall Street banker or a captain of industry, the response from the people whose savings you lost or who you were busily dropping from the payroll, was just as frightening. Dock workers in San Francisco and Teamsters in Minneapolis sparked general strikes in 1934, which inspired a huge leap forward for the American labor movement. Housing

Chris Carlsson, in our book *Uses of a Whirlwind*, calls it “radical patience”: a strong sense of history, a slow-burning resistance that takes many forms, an orientation to the long haul as much as the here-and-now of awakening.

After Slumber: Crisis and Resistance

Much has been made of how 2011 has offered up a “perfect storm” of conditions for revolt: the untenable impositions of austerity and debt, the obvious fallacy of change through electoral politics, crises along multiple dimensions. But the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, the “indignant” struggles in Europe, the student uprisings in Chile, and the now-exploding occupations of major cities cannot be explained through “perfect conditions,” nor solely understood as spontaneous struggle. They have emerged out of everyday resistances and frustrations, organized in a myriad of forms. We can return to this dynamic, if only because the occupations are sparking interest and conversations in new and startling places, of which self-identified radicals constitute only a small part.

Here in the US, we would do well to draw in histories of struggle that inform what we see today: the direct actions of AIDS activism and queer organizing in the 1980s, the movements of the urban homeless, the unions that refused co-optation, the inspiring work of environmental justice and ecological defense organizing. Connecting with contemporary struggles amplifies the occupied movement: the prisoners’ hunger strikes in California, wins resulting from domestic worker organizing, struggles in the universities. Its useful to remember that none of these struggles emerged fully-formed; they were messy from the outset and continued to engage with the messiness, shifting and re-making themselves in the wake of failures and difficulties. The messiness at the occupation sites, of the Occupy movement in its multitudinous forms, is thus no cause for alarm; what matters more is how it is engaged, through “radical patience,” and reaching out through concentric circles of activity and to other nodes of struggle.

The Many, the Few: Towards a Critical Conversation

“We are the 99%” finds its reflection in “Ye are many.” While “the few,” the 1%, is a good starting point for articulating the stark inequities of power and wealth throughout the world, the risk is in making it the endpoint as well. “The people” making up this 99% (and in its opposing 1%) are not easy to describe, but exploring these complexities is central to the movements’ ongoing conversation. A few thoughts.

The 99% and the 1% are not just opposed but related within a social system. The configurations of state and capital are not only crucial to maintaining inequity, but also defusing resistance. The 99% in practice is difficult to comprehend, as it is used in different ways. It is at once an illustration of Marx's notion of a class in itself—a sack of potatoes sitting dormant for statisticians pecking. In others, it is used to mean the class for itself, the class in struggle—are 99% objectively, but you are against 99% when you abuse us, when you assault us.

The 99% includes not only the police that have beaten and repressed those at the occupation sites and elsewhere, but also service providers that arbitrarily deny access to the most basic of needs and assistance, parents who punish gender non-conforming children, psychiatrists who abuse patients, and prison wardens and judges who maintain the smooth functioning of the criminal justice system, amongst many other functionaries.

There are nuances among the 99% such as unwaged work, which reproduces community and social relations (most of which is done by women); or social wages such as healthcare benefits (not available to many undocumented workers and precarious laborers) and the use of public commons (which are rare in the suburbs, where the majority of the US population now lives); or in the “wages of whiteness” and other benefits along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and ability. These differences are brought to bear at the occupations—where the sick, the imprisoned, the precariously employed, the survivors of trauma, the undocumented, the elderly, and children may not be as “active.”

Emergence: Sowing Radical Currents into Storms

Until recently, our collective was dialoguing with others around the questions of impasse, of a distinctive “stuckness” that seemed to pervade movements in the United States since the end of the alter-globalization cycle of confrontational protests a decade ago. Perhaps the “stuckness” is lifting; in fact, people might be more ready than we think, raring at the bit to generate powerful storms of activity that re-make the terrain of organizing.

What does seem certain is that something has to give. There are strong positions that could close-off organizing potential: relentless insistence on nonviolence, to the point of refusing self-defense; a settling into pre-figurative world-making in the space of the occupation, at the expense of necessary pushes towards confrontation; a bend towards symbolic reclamation

rather than more disruptive direct action that pushes “occupation” into new territory. There appears to be greater emphasis on media attention and memes, and less on the relationships we have, the new ones we're building, how we are changing through. There seems to be a stronger focus on the general assemblies (whose practices of radical democracy are still messy) and less on practices of listening, sharing of personal stories, harm reduction, and activities that center support and care.

A genuine opening-up of this struggle is already pushing back against these tendencies. Caucuses of women of color and queer folks are changing the conversations on the ground; through their own resistances, the organizing is shifting. We encourage greater energy to these forms of opening-up. We've discussed in our pamphlet *Winds from Below* the many tools at our disposal, such as inquiry, encounter, and dialog; in the space of the occupations, these can take the form of local organizing in nearby neighborhoods, churches, community centers, and street corners; community dialogs and interventions; or meetings with organizers in other historic and ongoing struggles. These activities can find a more solid grounding beyond financial instruments or electoral politicking: they can return to the stories of our everyday lives, the commonalities that resonate amongst each other—perhaps these can form the brunt of the general assemblies, both within and outside of the spaces of occupation. Such organizing recognizes people where they are, rather than where we would like them to be; it creates and reproduces autonomous self-activity that sustains us, but also pushes towards its own limits; it draws from the resources and activity of nonprofits, academic institutions, and longstanding community organizations, while consciously and radically extending beyond the confines that come with them.

Like lions after slumber, we are emerging, in ways that shout the possibility of new subjectivities and new worlds. The struggle did not begin with Occupy Wall Street; nor will it end there; and throughout its radically patient arc, it will continue to course through our everyday lives and resistances, our practices of care and support, our reaches towards the limits places upon us. We in Team Colors are excited to be part of the conversations and circulations; may they blossom in unvanquishable number. ★

Team Colors is a geographically-dispersed militant research collective. Together, they are the editors of the collection Uses of a Whirlwind: Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Social Currents in the United States (AK Press, 2010).