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Anarchism, protest and utopianism

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Anarchism, Protest and Utopianism

Ruth Kinna

The recent explosion of popular energy made manifest in the Occupy movement was described by Adbusters as a shift in global revolutionary tactics, for democracy and against corporatocracy, inspired by a desire to fuse 'Tahrir with the acampadas of Spain'.¹ Like the movements for social justice that preceded it, it brought defiant protest together with an openly utopian politics but it captured public attention in ways that the earlier, more conventional protests had not. As the former canon chancellor of St. Paul's Cathedral (the site of the London camp), Giles Fraser was well positioned to monitor the responses that Occupy provoked: denied the opportunity to join the familiar chorus of criticism about property damage that follows ordinary protest, critics complained instead about the repulsive smell and mess of the camp,² noting for good measure the distress caused to ordinary city workers by the (apparently usually invisible) addicts and homeless people it attracted. Observations that Occupy London quickly degenerated from a 'magnet for leftists bereft of ideas' to a 'magnet for the mentally unsound' soon became clichéd.³ At the same time, and simply by virtue of its presence, Occupy provided a sharp focus for anti-capitalist and anti-austerity resistance onto which a range of ideas about social justice, Christian virtue and outrage about financial mismanagement and greed were easily be projected. Conservatives bemoaned the extent to which the 'cancer' of 'self-pity' had undermined national pride, but did not deny the public sympathy that Occupy evinced.⁴ Occupy, Fraser argued, touched a nerve, it created a meme and gave voice to an ideal which cannot and will not be evicted.⁵

The construction and practices of Occupy are deeply anarchistic: no leaders, horizontal organisation, political diversity, consensus-decision making, educational experimentation, solidarity and mutual aid are its hallmarks. Alan Ryan described Occupy as an 'old-fashioned, utterly non-violent anarchist movement'. Kropotkin, he added, 'would have thought well of it'.⁶

David Graeber's stronger claim is that the movement embraced four anarchist principles: direct action, illegalism, the rejection of hierarchy and the embrace of prefigurative politics – the attempt 'to create the institutions of the new society in the shell of the old'.⁷ Occupy was not an explicitly anarchist movement, however. Self-identifying anarchists participated in it but seemed to have constituted a small minority⁸ and Occupy camps did not habitually advertise this association. Indeed, some sought consciously to avoid it – precisely because anarchism is so readily linked with violence in popular culture. Moreover, as I will argue, while there are important overlaps between the principles Occupy movements adopted and anarchism, the manner of their adoption differed from those pioneered by anarchists like Kropotkin and the historical anarchist groups with which he was associated. Illustrating the overlaps and divergences is complicated by the diversity and internal plurality of the movements in hand. To avoid benchmarking one movement another, ideas from both are set within frameworks of utopianism and protest. My claim is that, notwithstanding the risks that association with anarchism involves, contemporary movements might still have something to gain from an engagement with this older set of anarchist ideas. I look first at utopianism and then at protest.

Utopianism

In a discussion of Occupy Wall Street, Marina Sitrin highlights the prefigurative dimension of the movement. She argues:

The purpose is not to determine *the* path the country should take but to create the space for a conversation in which all can participate and determine together what the future should look like, while at the same time attempting to prefigure that society in our social relationships.⁹

The term 'prefiguration' refers to a range of different ideas: the rejection of vanguardism and the philosophical ('scientific') certainties on which elitist politics have been constructed, the

repudiation of the varieties of socialism that vanguard strategies have produced (highly centralised and industrialised dictatorships, albeit classless) and a disavowal of the Machiavellian politics which justify 'necessary' action by the end it is designed to achieve.¹⁰ As Graeber indicates, prefiguration also describes the building of a new world in the heart of the old, not just in ordinary sense of the word, as a foreshadowing, but in addition, as Sitrin signals, to assert an intimate relationship between social transformation and behaviours in the present.¹¹ It is in these last two senses that prefiguration is most clearly utopian. And in anarchist thought, it dovetails with concept of persistent utopia explored by Miguel Abensour.

The 'persistence of utopia', Abensour argues:

designates a stubborn impulse toward freedom and justice – the end of domination, of relations of servitude, and of relations of exploitation. Despite all its failures, disavowals, and defeats, this impulse is reborn in history, reappears, makes itself felt in the blackest catastrophe, resists as if catastrophe itself called forth new summations. The successive names of utopia are of little importance; what matters is the orientation toward what is different, the wish for the advent of a radical alterity here and now.¹²

For Abensour, persistent utopia is distinguished from other 'eternal' forms of utopia by its ontological condition. This is described in terms of Being, or more precisely, its non-achievement, an idea of becoming linked in turn to a conception of material process (as opposed to progress) that is understood as an open-ended, perpetually unfinished movement – 'the not-yet'. As a persistent form, then, utopia captures what Abensour describes as a fundamentally human idea of becoming in the not-yet.

Abensour draws on Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* to develop the ontology of utopia but finds earlier inspiration for the notion of persistence in William Morris's *The Dream of John Ball*, specifically Morris concept of the 'change beyond the change'. Morris's story, first serialised in 1886-87 in the paper *Commonweal*, is a tale of the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381. In it, Morris transports himself back in time to establish common cause between the fourteenth-century rebels who sought to free themselves from the yoke of feudalism and nineteenth century workers exploited and oppressed by capitalism. He reflects on the ironies of history, knowing full well that the Peasants' faced bloody defeat, and on the conjunction of peasants' failure to realize their emancipatory ends with the abolition of feudalism and the emergence of the liberal-market freedom that his own generation would resist as wage-slavery. This reflection forms the basis for his notion of the change beyond the change and it refers to the shifting grounds of grass-roots struggle and the constraints on liberation that social transformations bring. Arguably, in the change beyond the change, Morris identified continuities in historical struggles as well as the discontinuities which arose from the ironical twists of historical change – eternal and persistent utopian elements. And he elevated the courageous behaviours of the past as models for the present rather than contemplate the idea of becoming. Nevertheless, the principle of historical change that Morris communicates is, as Abensour describes, an 'ever-reborn movement toward something indeterminate' and not 'the repeated pursuit of a determinate content'.¹³

To the extent that Morris tied utopianism to trans-historical struggles against economic exploitation and political oppression and to fluid revolutionary movement, similar ideas of persistence can be found in overtly anarchist traditions. Rudolf Rocker provides one example:

Anarchism is no patent solution for all human problems, no Utopia of a perfect social order ... since on principle it rejects all absolute schemes and concepts. It

does not believe in any absolute truth, or in definite final goals for human development, but in an unlimited perfectibility of social arrangements and human living conditions, which are always straining after higher forms of expression, and to which for this reason one can assign no definite terminus nor set any fixed goal. The worst crime of any type of state is just that it always tries to force the rich diversity of social life into definite forms and adjust it to one particular form, which allows for no wider outlook and regards the previously existing status as finished. The stronger its supporters feel themselves, the more completely they succeed in bringing every field of social life into their service, the more crippling is their influence on the operation of all creative cultural forces, the more unwholesomely does it affect the intellectual and social development of any particular epoch. ¹⁴

This idea of utopia is sometimes defined as anti-utopian utopianism, to distinguish it from what is sometimes called the blueprint tradition that extends from ancient thought. Anarchists have rarely discussed utopianism in these terms, though the critique of utopianism that Abensour believes to be essential to persistent utopianism – what he calls the 'movement of suspicion of utopia within utopian culture'¹⁵ - is a feature of Marie-Louise Berneri's anarchist analysis of the European utopian tradition.¹⁶ Moreover, while anarchists like Peter Kropotkin regarded utopian socialists – particularly Robert Owen and Charles Fourier – as forerunners of anarchist traditions (rather than precursors of Marx, as Engels claimed), he was careful to distinguish anarchy from the phalanstery – the name given to Fourier's ideal community.¹⁷ What Kropotkin admired in Charles Fourier's work was not his scientifically contrived ideal of harmony, or the complex classification of personality types he devised to make his selection of the perfect communal mix. Rather, it was the idea of harmony 'which results

from the disorderly and incoherent movements of numberless hosts of matter, each of which goes its own way and all of which hold each in equilibrium'.¹⁸

The unfinished and indeterminate quality of utopia that Abensour and anarchists have celebrated does not inhibit thinking about utopian visions. On the contrary, taking his lead from Walter Benjamin, Abensour argues that utopia, properly understood, militates against Enlightenment programmes of emancipation. In this sense, it offers a mechanism for the 'reversal of emancipation' and the identification of three 'targets for the assaults of utopia': the valorization of work, the belief in continual progress, and the orientation toward the happiness of future generations. Elaborating on the idea, Abensour comments:

Once the sites of the reversal of emancipation are isolated and located, utopia is given the function of investing them and orienting them otherwise, apart from the idea of progress, the valorization of work, and the will to dominate nature. It falls to utopia to undo the reversal of modern emancipation by giving free reign to the excess that carries it, beyond the limits of the established order, to search for "lines of flight" as novel as they are extraordinary.¹⁹

Though the form that utopia takes is always shifting, its non-dominating vision can be derived from principles of reversal it isolates.

In anarchist traditions, utopian thinking has often fastened on practical experimentation; anarchists have found their utopian excess in critiques of capitalism, bureaucracy and top-down systems of organisation. And in asking questions about the constraints that existing capitalist societies impose, they have often sought to develop forms of organisation within the body of the state either to address problems of revolutionary action – Kropotkin's *Conquest of Bread* is an example – or to find creative space to develop alternatives in everyday life: Paul Goodman and Colin Ward are two of the most significant contributors to this tradition in the

twentieth century and their work explores urban planning, education, work, play, leisure and architecture as areas of utopian experimentation. Nowtopianism – though not specifically anarchist – expresses a similar commitment. And networks like Radical Routes support a plethora of small scale co-operative and mutual aid groups in a related spirit. A number of strains of contemporary anarchist utopianism have taken inspiration from Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). The TAZ offer different routes to practicing Ward's principle of anarchy in action and have inspired the creation of a multiplicity of spaces (social centres, graffiti walls, libraries, collective kitchens, music venues, bookfairs) which provide room for experimentation, creativity and dissent.

Admittedly, anarchists differ about the specification of utopias. There are strong anti-visionary currents within anarchism²⁰ and theoretical disagreements about the degree to which concerns about the quality of social relationships can or should take priority over the interest in the structuring of spaces. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that anarchist utopianism uses critique prefiguratively. To return to Morris's idea of the change beyond the change, it balances principles taken from the historical analysis of exploitation and oppression to think imaginatively about social contexts that, however fleetingly, might support non-exploitative, solidaristic and voluntarist relations, with an aim of developing in the body of the capitalist state ways of behaving, forms of organisation and social practices that will facilitate anarchy: the persistent utopia.

As Graeber observes, this practical spirit of persistent utopianism also seeped into Occupy, taking a particular form in the organisation of general assemblies and the practice of consensus-decision making. The claim of the protestors - 'this is what democracy looks like' - became central to movement's self-identification. More than just a process, consensus described Occupy's commitment to principles of pluralism, equality, fairness, participation and co-operation. As Occupy London explain:

With consensus, we take an issue, hear the range of enthusiasm, ideas and concerns about it, and synthesize a proposal that best serves everybody's vision ... In consensus, everyone matters. But for consensus to work, we must also be flexible ... Consensus means you get your say—it doesn't mean you get your way! ... When we all participate in shaping a course of action, we all feel a sense of commitment and responsibility. Unity is not unanimity - within consensus there is room for disagreement, for objections, reservations, for people to stand aside and not participate.²¹

Beyond the values of co-operation and negotiation that the consensual process supported, was an equally deep commitment to horizontal organisation. In other words, the adoption of consensus was simultaneously a rejection of liberal democracy and the principles of representation and accountability on which it draws. In consensus, participants work cooperatively with others but remain accountable for their own actions. They cannot turn decision-making power over to anyone else. Establishing the process in the body of the city, occupiers thus experimented with and showcased a form of democracy deemed suitable for the quality of the spaces they claimed. Consensus not only gave expression to the prefigurative, utopian politics that provided the dynamic for the occupations it also supported the libraries, learning spaces and leaderless agreements that flourished amid the tents, in a practical and tangible way. Most observers understood this, even if critics, upset by the sights and smells of the camps, did not. An item in *The Economist* made this comment about Occupy Wall Street:

It seeks to embody and thereby to demonstrate the feasibility of certain ideals of participatory democracy ... OWS is not simply a group of like-minded people gathered together to make a point with a show of collective force ... it has developed into an

ongoing micro-society with a micro-government that directly *exemplifies a principled alternative* to the prevailing American order.²²

Protest

While Occupy articulated its prefigurative, anti-utopian utopian aspirations through democratic activism, it also operated as a protest movement. The conjunction is implicit in Stephen Lerner's analysis: Occupy, he argues, 'has cracked open the door that lets us imagine that another world is possible'. He continues: 'Thousands of arrests, months of protest and acts of incredible personal risk and sacrifice have put inequality and Wall Street's out-of-control political and economic power on center stage'.²³ Taking inspiration from democracy movements in Egypt and elsewhere, Occupy echoed the cries of Los Indignados – protesting against austerity and cuts, and the murky world of finance which carries on business as usual. The popularity of the Guy Fawkes mask – stripped of its particular cultural resonances by Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* - served a striking visible marker of the protesters' outrage about existing patterns of distribution and economic inequality, incredible concentrations of wealth and financial greed.²⁴ Its roots, as one anarchist participant observes, were in the 2008 financial crash and the immiseration of the middle class.

... the occupy movement itself had its birth in the crisis ... It is a movement with a varied composition, which ranges from homeless folks to students to anarchists to workers, but more than anything else it is a movement of a middle class that is rapidly re-proletarianizing, with a collapsing standard of living and failing job prospects. In the process, it is finding itself in unfamiliar territory surrounded by unfamiliar landmarks and neighbors.²⁵

The statements issued by Occupy movements adopted different perspectives on the crisis. Occupy London, for example, stressed the internationalist, global dimensions of the protest. Not only did the movement advertise its international membership – breaking openly with liberal conceptions of citizenship – it opposed neo-liberalism and the international web of political and economic institutions responsible for its imposition and regulation. The written statement, United for Global Democracy, made this commitment explicit when it demanded

global democracy: global governance by the people, for the people. Inspired by our sisters and brothers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, New York, Palestine-Israel, Spain and Greece, we too call for a regime change: a global regime change. In the words of Vandana Shiva, the Indian activist, today we demand replacing the G8 with the whole of humanity – the G7,000,000,000.

Undemocratic international institutions are our global Mubarak, our global Assad, our global Gaddafi. These include: the IMF, the WTO, global markets, multinational banks, the G8/G20, the European Central Bank and the UN security council. Like Mubarak and Assad, these institutions must not be allowed to run people's lives without their consent. We are all born equal, rich or poor, woman or man. Every African and Asian is equal to every European and American. Our global institutions must reflect this, or be overturned.²⁶

This aspect of Occupy is hardly controversial. More controversial, is the idea that protest might be linked to anarchism, notwithstanding Occupy's anarchist membership. Indeed, David Goodway has recently argued that the very idea of anarchist protest is oxymoronic.

The nub of his claim is that protest is defined by liberal democratic institutions. Protest describes an attempt to reform bad policy or influence political elites and necessarily requirements in government institutions. Accordingly, he distinguishes protest from direct action and acts of resistance – propaganda by the deed - which express a rejection of the system in total. Anarchists might appear to enter into protest but in fact their actions are symbolic. With reference to the recent protest movements he argues:

British anarchists currently participating in demonstrations do so not as reformers but as anarchists. That is to say, anarchists differ from the adherents of almost every other ideology, as well as all advocates of specific political or social reforms, in having little or no interest in altering the policies of states, in shaping the opinions of politicians and decision-makers ... If anarchists are participating in - or initiating - demonstrations, it is not authority holders they are attempting to influence but their fellow citizens, intending to galvanize them into action and to create alternative, non-hierarchical social structures.²⁷

As Goodway argues, anarchists are committed to social transformation and, in distinction to other revolutionary groups, they do not believe that this can be achieved by controlling government machinery. Consequently, anarchist strategies for change have traditionally focused on the development of principles of action that will appeal to non-anarchists and, at the same time, reveal the limits of elite politics. The policy of propaganda by the deed – a motivational strategy pioneered by Errico Malatesta and others in the late 1870s, – was designed with precisely this purpose in mind: to heighten awareness of the state's vulnerability to oppressed and exploited people in order to ignite mass, popular rebellion. Later on, it was used either to bolster propaganda by the word, where anarchists enjoyed the

freedom to publish their ideas, or in place of it, where repression made publication impossible.

Similar ideas inform anarchist *direct action*. In the 1890s, when propaganda by the deed came to be associated with individual acts of terror, anarchists elaborated the idea in response to the adoption of *political action* by social democratic parties in the Second International. Both strategies had revolutionary intent, but whereas political action was based on strictly constitutional, parliamentary means, direct action was not bound by constitutionalism and it rejected parliamentarism and the principle of representation in favour of action taken directly by individuals, either acting alone or, preferably, in groups. Both strategies were similarly directed towards the building of mass movements. But unlike political action, direct action did not reserve a co-ordinating or directing role for the party.

Rather than militating against protest, anarchist strategies alter the terms on which protest actions are taken. Anarchist actions are typically designed to challenge the legitimacy of the distributions of power and privilege that anarchists believe states protect. Anarchists deliberately place themselves outside the mainstream political order and adopt tactics that are designed to disrupt established ways of life, contest social hierarchies and resist legal constraints. In doing so, they refuse the limits of political expression which governments conceptualise as subjects' or citizens' rights and attempt to raise awareness of the transformative, revolutionary potential of apparently mundane, everyday complaints. Consequently, although, as Goodway suggests, it is certainly the case that anarchists have little interest in engaging constructively in the formal or semi-formal machinery of central government, the history of the anarchist movement suggests that there is considerable room for protest. Paul Brousse, the anarchist who elaborated Malatesta's principle of propaganda by the deed as an educational policy included demonstrations in the activist tool-box

precisely because he saw their potential to raise awareness of the state's repressive function. Illegal or confrontational protests had the potential to provoke responses that would generate more positive publicity – and understanding - for anarchist ideas than any newspaper was able to do. Nor is it the case that the activities that protest supports are necessarily symbolic, if this term is used to describe an action that it not intended to resolve a problem. In the latter part of the nineteenth-century anarchists entered into protests against unemployment, for restrictions on the length of the working day and for free speech – campaigns that ordinary people considered important. Today, significant groups of anarchists remain interested in government policy and willing to enter into popular protest actions in solidarity with other members of society, typically the least socially-powerful groups. For example, anarchists active in the UK were involved in anti-Poll tax protests, in climate camps, anti-road building actions, campaigns for demilitarisation and against the so-called welfare reforms.²⁸ In Occupy, too, David Graeber entertained the – admittedly remote - possibility that Occupy might exercise a positive influence on policy. Interviewed about Occupy Wall Street, he argued: 'If Nancy Pelosi is suddenly inspired to put out a call for a debt jubilee, that would be great. Nobody is going to say it's bad because it's backed by a government we consider to be illegitimate ... As long as you are on the same path, what we are really arguing for is what's possible so there's no reason we can't work together'.²⁹

The illegalism of anarchist direct action is often identified with property damage. And although anarchists have experimented with variety of forms (carnival, non-violent action (confrontational or otherwise) subversion, sabotage or hactivism, for example) the issue of violence probably remains the deepest fracture in discussions about appropriate methods – both within anarchist circles and the wider movements of which they have been a part. These debates often conceal contestable assumptions about the way in which violence is

conceptualised and the impact of apparently non-violent actions. They also tend to abstract questions about the morality of violence from broader anarchist concerns about the educational or propagandistic force of direct action, the public intelligibility of particular acts and the extent to which methods can be seen to reinforce anarchist aspirations – encouraging public sympathy and/or garnering the support of grass roots movements. This persistent concern with public intelligibility importantly cuts across the more familiar worries about violence. And it has a long history.

In the 1870s Paul Brousse argued that assassinating monarchs was poor anarchist propaganda, even when the target was widely loathed, since the rejection of monarchy was strongly associated with republicanism in the public mind. On the other hand, an illegal march under the banner of a prohibited flag powerfully illustrated the state's repressive intolerance in ways the non-anarchists might find surprising or shocking. Even anarchists like Kropotkin, who judged the rightness and wrongness of actions by the motivations of activists, accepted that consequence was a measure of usefulness. On this scale, intelligibility was a relevant consideration – perhaps more relevant than policy success. Following Brousse's logic, the white bike scheme, for example, highlighted the values of mutual aid, sharing and, perhaps, the desirability of finding alternatives to motorised transport – even though the bikes disappeared. The bombing of Francoist institutions, notably the Spanish National Tourist Office and Embassy during the years of the dictatorship was similarly designed to raise awareness of the role that tourism played as an income-generator and legitimising tool. And the decision to detonate out of hours was intended to minimise public revulsion of the violence.³⁰

As Graeber argues, insofar as it embraced illegalism and direct action, Occupy followed an anarchist model of protest, just as it expressed an anarchistic utopian idea. Even critics acknowledged the departure from ordinary protest. Although David Cameron defended the Occupy London's right to protest as 'fundamental to our country', attempting to force the protest into a liberal-democratic frame, he went on to describe the idea of 'establishing tents in the middle of a city' as unconstructive, thereby acknowledging the resistant, anarchistic stance that the protest was taking.³¹ Wrestling with the suggestion that Occupy London resembled his Big Society idea, he described the former as a protest organized lying down, in a fairly comatose state.³² Electoral apathy and elite anxieties about dwindling sources for party funds suggests that his descriptor is more appropriately applied to the operation of mainstream politics. Nevertheless, Cameron was surely right to distinguish Occupy London from the Big Society (BS) and his comparison is instructive: the energy that both seek to release was generated in Occupy precisely because participants were able to set their own agendas and were not expected to meet objectives defined by government, as the BS initiative intends. Whereas BS relies on groups and individuals to find remedies to social problems that government either cannot resolve or will not tackle, Occupy invited people to come together to think about the crisis that government had overseen and in which it was complicit. The protest refused to take a predictable form – a demonstration 'on two feet', organised weeks in advance, authorised by the police, enabling sections of the electorate to voice its dissatisfaction while accepting the principle of parliamentary sovereignty. Occupy did not fit this mould – and not just because the tent cities had a temporary permanence, but also because they operated virtually, functioning through multiple and diffuse online networks.³³

Beyond the illegalism of the protest, however, Occupy was ambivalent on the question of intelligibility. On the one hand, the occupations both focused attention on

capitalism's crisis and helped prompt public debate about a number of related issues. On the other, Occupy resisted endorsing any particular alternatives and openly refused to make official demands. As a focus for public debate, the camps functioned brilliantly as spaces for critical reflection and discussion. More than that, a mass of ideas and proposals tumbled out of the learning spaces and working groups that Occupy established. As Jeffrey Juris notes Occupy also provided a springboard for online communication:

many occupiers have been hard at work developing both online and offline systems for aggregating and synthesizing the manifold experiences, proposals, and ideas being generated by occupiers and sympathizers around the country, ranging from the We Are the 99% Tumblr to handwritten messages on paper banners, declarations such as the one released by the #Occupy Wall Street General Assembly, and various wikis that have sprung up on #Occupy websites, including one on the #Occupy Boston wiki dedicated to creating a statement of purpose.³⁴

All this activity, he adds, gives 'reason to believe that such experiments will continue to reach ever greater numbers of people, making the #Occupy Everywhere movements particularly powerful laboratories for the production of democratic alternatives'.

The refusal to subscribe to a set of alternatives and to make official demands was well understood and defended robustly by insiders. A member of Occupy Bradford explains:

Occupy has picked up on a simple fact: traditional politics has failed us in terms of economic justice, the environment, democracy and civil liberties. And it is becoming

clearer that no single plan, be it free market capitalism, state-centred communism, or any other, can provide us with the knowledge and skills we need to change.

There's something both humble and mocking in how the Occupy movement refuses to have a simple answer. Humble because it's unlike how we've always done things, which is to competitively engage in propaganda campaigns and sloganeering, hoping that the public will get behind a particular viewpoint, and that our idea will 'win' and the other 'lose'. Occupy recognises a more symbiotic, consensus-based approach to deciding what may work. Mocking because the movement has looked at elites and said "yes, you're right, we don't have a plan. And you don't either."³⁵

The ambivalence of Occupy's position did not render the action unintelligible. As a form of direct action, Occupy seemed to fit the model of propaganda by the deed that, like the white bike scheme, made the intelligibility of the action integral to its practice. Yet the result was that the consensual practices adopted in the camps became critical to the public understanding of the protest and that the ideas and unofficial demands that streamed from the tent cities were detached from them. At issue was not just how or whether the presence of the camps and the practices they adopted were intended to challenge the economic and corporate interests held responsible for the financial crisis, but the status of the alternatives that the occupations inspired. While the practice of consensus operated within the boundaries of the camps, the wider discussion that the occupation sparked opened up the possibility of multiple and conflicting interpretations of politics that anarchists like Brousse sought to avoid.

Anarchism and Occupy

As Michael Moore argues, Occupy immediately struck a popular chord: 'What other political movement in modern times' he asks 'has won the sympathy and/or support of the majority of the American public ...?' He continues:

With Occupy Wall Street, you don't have to convince the majority of Americans that greed rules Wall Street, that the banks have no one's interests but their own at heart or that corporate America is out to squeeze every last bit of labor and wages out of everyone's pocket. Everybody gets it. Even those who oppose it. The hardest part of this or any movement – building a majority – has already happened.³⁶

Moore's observation pinpoints the reasons behind Occupy's enormous success. It also highlights the predicament that movements like Occupy and anarchism face and the implications of the theoretical positions they adopt. As he argues, the critical thrust of the movement was clear. Less clear, however, was the significance of the direct action for the protest. Here, repetitious commentary about the failure of Occupy movements to articulate or express its demands suggests a degree of public confusion - a failure or inability to connect the behaviours and practices adopted in the camps with the critiques that motivated them and a lack of appreciation of the prefigurative politics at their heart. The audacious claim to public space was itself treated as the act of prefiguration. Protest was conflated with direct action expressed as utopian experimentation. The conflation not only allowed critics like Cameron to ridicule Occupy for pursuing the idea that global injustice might be tackled by camping, but in the context of a crisis that is so well-understood by so many different groups, exposed the protest to conservative re-articulation. Voline, the anarchist historian of the Russian Revolution, noted how

porous common causes are to different utopian ideals and traditions. His example was *'The land to the peasants! The factories to the workers!'*.³⁷ 'We are the 99%' is one of Occupy's equivalent battle-cries. And it's a claim which is as malleable to an idea of a future slavishly modelled on the pattern of the past as it is to one re-imagined. In Morris's terms, it lends itself to a change beyond a change which mirrors the disappointing experience of the fourteenth century peasants. The rejection of austerity aligns quite readily with discourses of deservingness and thrift, images of scrounging and illegal immigration, and the promise of the return to growth modelled on disposable consumption. Right-libertarian supporters of Ron Paul, Juris notes, were involved in Occupy.

It might be argued that Occupy's persistent utopianism undermined the force of the protest. Michael Albert's criticism of the 'opponents of too much vision' is that the refusal to specify utopian ideals enables elites to hijack popular aspirations and impose on them their own ideas and institutional designs. The discussion of propaganda by the deed suggests instead that the transformative potential of protest is linked to the dynamic relationship between (different forms of) utopianism and direct action, pointing toward the application of Occupy to resist evictions, organise debt strikes and take back the land movements.³⁸ A number of participants and observers have shown that some protesters have followed precisely this route: not making demands or issuing claims about perfect solutions but using the ethical capital of the movement as part of a continuing process of circumvention and direct action. Such an approach need not be seen as an alternative to the mass, illegal occupation of public spaces or the networking associated with it, but a parallel and complimentary casting of its utopian role.

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