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OCCUPY: A Name Fixed to a Flashpoint¹

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Beyond the Choir

PUBLIC PERFORMANCE AND BACKSTAGE

We know that Rosa Parks was not merely tired when she refused to give up her bus seat. She was acting with agency, and the appearance of spontaneity was part of an intentional performance designed for strategic effect (Polletta 2006). It was fine—intended even—for most people to see and sympathize with her as a tired woman who had simply had enough. It would not be fine, however, for students and strategists of social movements to take her performance at face value. We must also look behind the scenes.

Accordingly, it behooves us to explore Occupy Wall Street's (OWS's) backstage and not take its bountiful public performances at face value when assessing the movement (Goffman 1954). What complicates matters is that what we might usually think of as a movement's backstage—for example, decision-making processes, general meetings,

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working groups, planning, and so on—is not really behind the scenes with OWS. It is all part of the public performance. To many OWS participants, internal democratic processes were often indistinguishable from external messages. To me OWS's hyper-democratic process was an important *part* of the public message. General Assemblies at Zuccotti Park in New York City operated as a brilliant theater, dramatically juxtaposing a visibly participatory people's movement against what OWS participants and sympathizers perceived to be a rotted political system that has effectively disenfranchised most Americans. The downside is that General Assemblies were not functional forums for actual decision making. Because they were so cumbersome and easily derailed, many of the most active OWS organizers, myself included, eventually stopped going to them. Thus, much of the real decision making was pushed *back*-backstage into underground centers of informal power.

Mike McCarthy's informal leadership—and admitted manipulation of process—in Occupy Providence is a common Occupy story (Wengronowitz 2013). What is less common is McCarthy's candor in recounting his own actions and role. For my part, I was self-consciously part of one of these centers of informal power in New York for most of last year. Like McCarthy, I, too, “was never for the no leadership thing” (Wengronowitz 2013, p. 215), and I agree with Jaffe that “the ‘leaderless’ structure of Occupy masked the fact that a small core group of people did a large amount of the work” (Smucker 2012a; Jaffe 2013, p. 201). I think McCarthy's sentiments (Wengronowitz 2013) are a more accurate reflection of reality than the on-paper process put forward by the Structure Working Group described by Leach (2013).

A POLITICAL MOVEMENT

My perspective on OWS has been informed primarily through my experience as a core participant in New York City. With the original intention of lending a hand for a few days, I arrived at Zuccotti Park in early October 2011 and stayed deeply involved in OWS for most of the next year. My work was primarily with the public relations working group,² the movement-building working group, Occupy Homes, and coordinating with allied organizations (e.g., labor unions, nonprofit advocacy organizations, faith communities, and more). By the time I arrived at Zuccotti Park, OWS had already dramatically broken into the national media cycle and was in the process of delegitimizing a decades-old hegemonic conservative narrative, replacing it with a biting critique of economic inequality and a rigged political establishment. The rallying cry, “We are the 99 percent!” was popularly framing a new kind of class consciousness. And it was all thanks to an audacious, defiant, and theatrical occupation of public space at the doorstep of Wall Street, the named culprit of the nation's economic and democratic crises.

As Flacks (2013, p. 205) notes, “For the last 30 years, the left has been in a defensive mode.” Occupy was suddenly advancing a potent political offensive, opening up new possibilities for challenger social justice movements. The immediate imperative for me

and many other OWS organizers was to do whatever we could to help pry the political window open wider, which in the short term meant keeping the performance (i.e., the occupation of Zuccotti Park) going.

My goals and many other core participants' goals were absolutely political. So I take issue with Rushkoff's (2013, p. 171) suggestion that OWS "is more like a university than a political movement" and that it is "not a game that someone wins, but rather a form of play." Although these descriptions are not entirely off base, at some point I started picturing Burning Man³ rather than OWS. It is problematic to crop distinctively political dynamics and motivations out of the picture.

Characteristic of a political movement, OWS "had a clear target," as Milkman, Lewis, and Luce (2013) note. The targets: Wall Street and a political system rigged to serve only the very wealthy. Lack of explicit demands or a platform did not mean OWS was a "postnarrative" movement, as Rushkoff (2013) suggests. In fact, changing the national narrative was arguably OWS's most remarkable success. The popular OWS chant, "Banks got bailed out, we got sold out," for example, carries a story that frames a conflict between a collective protagonist ("we" who "got sold out") and antagonists (banks and the political system that bailed them out). Moreover, the often-bemoaned "lack of demands" was not really a *lack* at all; it was a strategic decision, as one of Milkman et al.'s (2013) interviewees explains. OWS and the slogan "We are the 99 percent!" initially functioned as floating signifiers with broad populist appeal (Lévi-Strauss 1987; Laclau 2005; Smucker 2012b). Getting too precise too fast (with particular demands) would have nailed down the signifier and narrowed the new movement's appeal in the midst of a much-needed broadening phase. The task at hand was to shift common sense and move society in the direction of social justice, even if that direction was somewhat ambiguous. To the chagrin of lovers of precision (academics included), ambiguity was at least momentarily the burgeoning movement's best friend. To me this was a strategic imperative rather than—or at least more than—"a liberal universalist conception of inclusivity in which 'the 99%' is a taken-for-granted category and understood to exist in-itself," as Maharawal (2013, p. 178) suggests.

In the wake of OWS's essential articulation, windows are now opening in fights for particular demands. As Piven (2013, p. 193) suggests of the recent Chicago teachers' strike, "It was as if the teachers suddenly took courage because they realized that they were part of the 99 percent." Important long-standing issues and campaigns (with specific demands) are getting a kind of "occupy boost," for example, in the proliferation of ant foreclosure campaigns under the banner *Occupy Homes*, with a string of victories in cities like Atlanta and Minneapolis, as discussed by Jaffe (2013) and Manilov (2013).

OWS is not a utopian sideshow (Smucker 2012c); it is brimming with grassroots political actors intent on a main stage intervention. As Piven (2013) explains, OWS "succeeded in putting the issue of extreme inequality in the political spotlight, . . . made Wall Street its target, and . . . reached out to find allies." Many core participants engaged continuously in classic political organizing tasks, as Piven (2013, p. 192) describes, "reach[ing] out to potential allies among workers, students and community

groups.” These efforts bore fruit, as “unionists rallied to defend Zuccotti Park when the Mayor first threatened to evict the Occupiers, and joined them in their marches” (Piven 2013).⁴ Some of us worked relationships with sympathetic city council members; some negotiated with the local community board; and some strategized with unions, community groups, and national advocacy organizations. While the news cameras and our own social media zoomed in on the public performance in the park, these behind-the-scenes tasks were the scaffolding that propped up the temporary platform.

POLITICAL AND PREFIGURATIVE

Of course those of us who were self-consciously political in our orientation toward OWS were clearly not the only tendency. OWS’s public performances were not always designed for politically instrumental purposes; they were often much more expressive than instrumental. Zuccotti Park was a bastion of expressiveness, wherein participants could collectively (or individually) express emotions, creativity, values, opinions, and visions in countless ways without every participant having, necessarily, to grasp whether or how these expressions fit together into a strategic framework to achieve instrumental goals.

Related to this, much has been made about the prefigurative (Breines 1982) aspects of OWS. The encampments themselves served as more than a protest and more than just an instrumental tactic. Many participants consciously prefigured the kind of society they were striving to build. Prefigurative organizing practices are not only expressive, though. Maharawal (2013, p. 178) offers both pragmatic and political rationales: “Pragmatically, consensus decision-making served as a way to ensure that participants felt invested and involved in the movement and so maintained their commitment because of this feeling of investment. . . . Politically, this form of decision making served as a way to challenge and critique structures of liberal democracy . . . often characterized as illegitimate, unrepresentative, disempowering and politically compromised.” These prefigurative and horizontal streaks did not come from nowhere. Piven (2013, p. 191) provides context: OWS fits with a trend of “more recent movements” including Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Clamshell Alliance, and the Global Justice movement, that “have struggled to create alternative forms of organization, sometimes called anarchist, emphasizing internal direct democracy.”

The challenge is that OWS processes and rituals came to stand in for a strategy for many participants. Particular forms of process—from mic checks to sparkle fingers⁵ to making space where everyone who wants to can speak—are often confused with political content (i.e., goals or a platform). Leach (2013) describes activists fetishizing the process. The prefigurative world can become a kind of game, in Rushkoff’s (2013, p. 167) words, “played for the sake of play. The object of the game is to keep the game going as long as possible.” The “bureaucracies of anarchy” (Leach 2013) can become more about ritualized signifying of belonging and “getting it” than about actually aiding democratic decision-making processes. This is not to denigrate these particular forms or even to dismiss the importance of collective ritual, let alone internal

democracy, in a challenger movement. Collective ritual fosters strong group identity, cohesion, and solidarity. Participants' willingness to give of themselves depends on this strong sense of solidarity and identity (Smucker 2012d). But if our intention is to change the world—not just prefigure a utopian vision with no idea about how to actualize it—then collective rituals must take their place within a larger overarching strategic framework. Identity performance in social movement groups is not new to OWS, though, and neither is the familiar tension between the instrumental and the expressive (Smucker, Russell, and Malitz 2012).⁶ Savvy political organizers have to help set up group-binding expressive rituals that are also designed for maximum strategic value (Smucker 2012e). Sometimes this was accomplished impressively in OWS; other times, not so much.

SPECIMEN OR INDICATOR?

Should we treat OWS as a specimen to be studied under a microscope, a distinct thing unto itself; or should we see it as an indicator of bigger patterns, a name fixed to a flashpoint? Most of the authors in this issue examine OWS primarily as specimen, and I have mostly followed suit in this afterword. Such an examination is worthwhile, but we must be careful to not lose sight of the larger picture for both empirical and strategic reasons. Social movements are not neatly bounded things. Moreover, their ambiguous boundaries are one of their greatest strengths. Movements gain power, resources, and capacity not by building all their own infrastructure from scratch, but by courting the buy-in or alignment of whole swaths of society (McCarthy and Wolfson 1992; Smucker 2012f).

Movements are amorphous, shape-shifting things. “The great protest movements of history lasted not for a moment but for decades.” Piven (2012, p. 223) explains, “. . . they began in a particular place, sputtered and subsided, only to re-emerge elsewhere in perhaps a different form, influenced by local particularities of circumstance and culture.” This long view offers hope when we find ourselves “in a valley on that graph” of movement activity (Jaffe 2013, p. 200)—hope, and also instruction. We might view OWS as (1) a dramatic manifestation that named an underlying crisis, and (2) a harbinger of more and bigger manifestations of collective action to confront that crisis.

Along these lines Flacks (2013) sees OWS “not as a movement in itself but as one expression of a rising, and very long delayed, national and global class struggle. . . . This period, beginning 2011, may well be seen as the point in time where class solidarity and anger started to be a conscious driving force in collective action . . . everywhere we look mass uprising is boiling up and it has taken a class-y turn.”

A danger in regarding OWS as a distinct thing unto itself is that we can become unwitting accomplices to its otherization. OWS becomes about a certain kind of tactic or, worse, a certain kind of person—one that many people see as fitting into a stereotyped “other” category that they have difficulty relating to (e.g., *protester*, *occupier*, and *hippie*)—rather than a popular response to a common crisis. Furthermore, if a movement comes to conceptualize itself as clearly delineated from society, it is probably in

trouble. Confirmation bias and self-reinforcing feedback loops, discussed by Rushkoff (2013), in the course of oppositional struggle can push core members of once-popular movements toward insularity, isolation, delusion, and narcissism (Miller 1999; Smucker 2012d).

Thus, OWS-as-indicator is an essential lens—one that sociologists are positioned to help articulate. It is critical to stay oriented toward society and the broader political context. Flacks (2013, p. 204) argues that “The question isn’t: ‘where is Occupy going?’, but rather can and how will people find ways to redistribute power and wealth in democratic directions.” An essential task of forthcoming organizing efforts will be to move more people, institutions, and swaths of society to identify as part of a collective effort—a *movement*—to accomplish these ends.

NOTES

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²My work with the public relations working group included extensive monitoring and analysis of news coverage about OWS, which also informed my perspective on the movement.

³Burning Man is a participant-driven annual event held in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada, where “tens of thousands of participants gather . . . to create Black Rock City, dedicated to community, art, self-expression, and self-reliance. They depart one week later, having left no trace whatsoever” (Burning Man 2012).

⁴Unions were in fact responsible for a huge part of the turnout on the biggest days of action (e.g., October 15 and November 17, 2011).

⁵OWS popularized the “human microphone,” a means of amplifying participants’ voices when amplification equipment was unavailable or prohibited. Starting with the phrase, “Mic check!” individual speakers break up their remarks into succinct segments that are loudly repeated in unison by other participants within earshot. “Sparkle fingers” is one of many hand gestures regularly employed by OWS participants during meetings and assemblies. Participants twinkle their fingers as a kind of silent applause to indicate agreement with what is being said. While mic checks and sparkle fingers often serve functional purposes during meetings and street protests, they also serve as rituals that reinforce an Occupy group culture.

⁶We might also describe this tension in OWS in terms of the *political* and the *prefigurative*.

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