

# Political Disobedience

Bernard E. Harcourt

The political phenomenon that was born in Zuccotti Park in the fall of 2011 and spread rapidly across the nation and abroad immediately challenged our vocabulary, our grammar, our political categories—in short, our very language of politics. Although it was quickly apparent that a political paradigm shift had taken place before our eyes, it was hard to discern what Occupy Wall Street really represented, politically. It is time to begin to name this phenomenon and in naming to better understand it. So let me propose a term: *political disobedience*.

Occupy Wall Street is best understood, I would suggest, as a new form of *political* as opposed to *civil* disobedience that fundamentally rejects the political and ideological landscape that has dominated our collective imagination in this country since before the cold war. Civil disobedience accepts the legitimacy of the political structure and of our political institutions but resists the moral authority of the resulting laws. It is “civil” in its disobedience—civil in the etymological sense of taking place within a shared political community, within the classical Latin framework of *civilitās*, within an art of civil government. Civil disobedience accepts the verdict and condemnation that the civilly disobedient bring upon them-

It's been truly inspiring to work with Tom Mitchell, Mick Taussig, and Alan Thomas on this project on the Occupy movement. It has also been an honor and pleasure to work closely with Tom Durkin on legal and political matters growing out of the Occupy movement. I've learned tremendously from my brilliant, politically disobedient graduate students, especially Chris Berk, Kyla Bourne, Greg Goodman, Irami Osei-Frimpong, Jeremy Siegman, and Kailash Srinivasan. Special thanks to Simon Critchley, Steven Lukes, Arien Mack, Micah Philbrook, Alexander de la Paz, Mía Ruyter, Renata Salecl, David Showalter, Scott Sundby, Jamieson Webster, and Cornel West for conversations and inspiration, and again to Chris Berk for sharing his field notes.

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selves. It respects the legal norm at the very moment of resistance and places itself under the sanction of that norm. If it resists the legal sanction that it itself entails, it is, in effect, no longer truly civil disobedience. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” “an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly *accepts the penalty* by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing *the very highest respect for law*.”<sup>1</sup> Civil disobedience does not aim to displace the law-making institutions or the structure of legal governance but rather to challenge the governing laws by demonstrating their injustice.

Political disobedience, by contrast, resists the very way in which we are governed. It rejects the idea of honoring or expressing the “highest respect for law.” It refuses to willingly accept the sanctions meted out by the legal and political system. It challenges the conventional way that political governance takes place, that laws are enforced. It turns its back on the political institutions and actors who govern us all. It resists the structure of partisan politics, the traditional demand for policy reforms, the call for party identification, and, beyond that, the very ideologies that have dominated the postwar period.

Occupy Wall Street was politically disobedient in precisely this sense: it disobeyed not only our civil structure of laws and political institutions but politics *writ large*. The Occupy movement rejected conventional political rationality, discourse, and strategies. It did not lobby Congress. It defied the party system. It refused to align or identify itself along traditional lines. It refused even to formulate a reform agenda or to endorse the platform of any existing political group. Defying convention, it embraced the idea of being leaderless and adopted rhizomic, nonhierarchical governing structures. And it turned its back on conventional political ideologies. Occupy Wall Street was politically disobedient to the core; it even resisted attempts to be categorized. The Occupy movement confounded our traditional understandings and predictable political categories.

Those who incessantly wanted to gift a reasonable set of demands to the movement—sympathizers and fellow travelers like Paul Krugman or

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail (1963),” *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco, 1986), p. 294; emphasis added.

BERNARD E. HARCOURT is the Julius Kreeger Professor of Law and Criminology and professor and chairman of the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago.

Nicholas Kristof—showed good will and generosity but failed to understand that the Occupy movement was precisely about disobeying that kind of conventional political maneuver. The strategy instead, as Occupy Wall Street reported on its website, was to generate “a general assembly in every backyard” and “on every street corner”;<sup>2</sup> to give birth to new spaces of occupation that open possibilities for new ideas, tactics, and forms of resistance; and to allow for occupations that generate possibilities without imposing ideologies.

In resolutely resisting, Occupy Wall Street liberated itself from imposed stereotypes and projections and from others’ prejudices—from the tyranny of facile solutions and narrow-minded policy talk. It ambiguated, deliberately and incessantly, so as not to be pinned down or dismissed. This was captured neatly in an article penned by three members of the economics working group at Occupy London and published in the *Financial Times* in January 2012—of all places. And that’s the point:

Fans of Friedrich von Hayek may be surprised to learn that the Austrian economist is the talk of Occupy London. Hayek’s observation that distributed intelligence in a voluntary co-operative is a hallmark of real economy rings true beneath the bells of St Paul’s. Occupy is often criticised for not having a single message but that misses the point: we are committed to incorporating different preferences before coming up with policies. In this sense, it could be said we work more like a market than the corporate boardroom or lobbyist-loaded politics—our ideas are radical but also just and democratically decided.<sup>3</sup>

This desire to ambiguate and refusal to articulate policy demands or even a single, unified message went hand in hand with a rejection of the worn-out ideologies of the cold war—with a recognition that those very ideologies played right into the hands of the financial, economic, and political elites, that they served to redistribute massive wealth over the past forty years and concentrate it at the top. The ideologies themselves enabled rather than resisted the disproportionate accumulation of capital.

In this sense, those who persistently wanted to push conventional political ideologies onto the Occupy movement—fellow travelers like Slavoj Žižek or Raymond Lotta of the Revolutionary Communist Party—also missed the central point of the resistance. When Žižek complained in Au-

2. Quoted in “Occupywallst.org,” *occupymediawiki.org*, 99.occupymediawiki.org/wiki/Occupywallst.org

3. David Dewhurst, Peter Dombi, and Naomi Colvin, “How Hayek Helped Us to Find Capitalism’s Flaws,” *Financial Times*, 25 Jan. 2012, [www.ft.com/cms/s/0/89d242b0-4687-11e1-89a8-00144feabdco.html](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/89d242b0-4687-11e1-89a8-00144feabdco.html)

gust 2011 in the *London Review of Books*, referring to the London riots, that we have entered a “post-ideological era” where “opposition to the system can no longer articulate itself in the form of a realistic alternative, or even as a utopian project, but can only take the shape of a meaningless outburst,”<sup>4</sup> he failed to understand that many of the emerging protests around the world—especially the Occupy movement—are *precisely about resisting the old ideologies*. It’s not that the resisters could not articulate those ideologies or any utopian projects or a coherent set of political maxims. It’s that they are actively resisting them; they are being *politically disobedient*. And when Žižek declared a few months later at Zuccotti Park “that our basic message” is “what social organization can replace capitalism?”<sup>5</sup>—again, he missed a central axis of this new form of political resistance.

One way to understand the Occupy movement is to see it as a refusal to engage these sorts of worn-out ideological debates rooted in the cold war. The point is that those tired ideological divides—with the Chicago Boys at one end and the Maoists at the other—merely served as a tool in this country for the financial and political elite. The ploy, in the United States, was to demonize the specter of a controlled economy (that of the former Soviet Union or China, for example) in order to prop up the illusion of a free market and to legitimize the dream of less regulation—of what was euphemistically called deregulation. By reinvigorating the fantasy of *laissez-faire*, the financial and political architects of our economy over the past four plus decades—both Republicans and Democrats—were able to disguise massive redistribution to the top by claiming they were simply “deregulating,” when all along they were actually *reregulating* to the benefit of their largest campaign donors.

This ideological fog blinded the American people to the pervasive regulatory mechanisms that inevitably organize a colossal late-modern economy and that necessarily distribute wealth throughout society—and, in this country, that quietly redistributed massive amounts of resources to the wealthiest elites. A central point of the Occupy movement is that it takes *both* a big government *and* the neoliberal illusion of free markets to achieve such massive redistribution. And if one looks closely at the tattered posters that lined Zuccotti Park, it is clear that the voices of protest challenged *both* sides of the ideological divide. Many voices were intensely antigovernment. Many stridently opposed big government—while others challenged the free market. This was captured neatly in one of my favorite

4. Slavoj Žižek, “Shoplifters of the World Unite,” *London Review of Books*, 19 Aug. 2011, [www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite](http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite)

5. Žižek, “Slavoj Žižek Speaks at Occupy Wall Street: Transcript,” *Impose Magazine*, [www.imposemagazine.com/bytes/slavoj-zizek-at-occupy-wall-street-transcript](http://www.imposemagazine.com/bytes/slavoj-zizek-at-occupy-wall-street-transcript)

posters from Zuccotti Park in October 2011, which read: “I don’t need sex. I get fucked by the government every day!” That is not progovernment, nor pro-big-government. It is not Keynesian, nor socialist—but at the same time, it is physically *occupying* Wall Street.

On this reading, Occupy Wall Street took to task both of the worn-out cold war ideologies. And for good reason. The semantic games had devastating effects. As Douglas Massey minutely documents, after decades of improvement the income gap between the richest and poorest in this country has dramatically widened since the 1970s, resulting in what social scientists now refer to as the U-curve of increasing inequality.<sup>6</sup> Recent reports from the Census Bureau confirm this, with evidence in September 2011—when Occupy Wall Street hatched—that “the number of Americans living below the official poverty line, 46.2 million people, was the highest number in the 52 years the bureau has been publishing figures on it.”<sup>7</sup> Today, 27 percent of African Americans and 26 percent of Hispanics in this country—more than one in four—live in poverty.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, one in nine African American men between the ages of twenty and thirty-four are incarcerated. The level of inequality has grown so much in this country that “the 400 wealthiest Americans have a greater combined net worth than the bottom 150 million Americans,” and “the top 1 percent of Americans possess more wealth than the entire bottom 90 percent”; under President George W. Bush’s expansion years, 2002 to 2007, “65 percent of economic gains went to the richest 1 percent.”<sup>9</sup>

These outcomes pushed so many across the nation to a new form of political disobedience. It is, I believe, a type of resistance to politics along multiple dimensions—a resistance to making policy demands, to playing the political game, to partisan politics, to old-fashioned ideology. It bears a family resemblance to what Michel Foucault referred to as *critique*, resistance to being governed in this manner or what he dubbed “voluntary insubordination” or, better yet, as a word play on the famous expression of Etienne de la Boétie, “voluntary unservitude.” What critique calls for, Foucault suggested, is “*inservitude volontaire*”—*voluntary inservitude* (using the negative or privative force of the Latin prefix *in*) or *voluntary unservi-*

6. See Douglas S. Massey, *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System* (New York, 2008).

7. Sabrina Tavernise, “Soaring Poverty Casts Spotlight on ‘Lost Decade,’” *New York Times*, 13 Sept. 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/09/14/us/14census.html?\\_r=2&scp=1&sq=poverty%20levels&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/14/us/14census.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=poverty%20levels&st=cse)

8. See *ibid.*

9. Nicholas Kristof, “America’s ‘Primal Scream,’” *New York Times*, 15 Oct. 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/opinion/sunday/kristof-americas-primal-scream.html?\\_r=1&ref=nicholasdkristof](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/opinion/sunday/kristof-americas-primal-scream.html?_r=1&ref=nicholasdkristof)

*tude* (using the negative force of the Old English prefix *un*).<sup>10</sup> By this, I take it, Foucault had in mind the idea of resistance to being governed—or, more precisely, to being governed *in this or that way*.<sup>11</sup>

### A Leaderless Movement

Occupy Wall Street claims to be a “leaderless” movement.<sup>12</sup> This is one of the most controversial aspects of the movement and the source of much criticism—even among friends and fellow travelers. Some Occupy members suggest that the movement is not so much leaderless as leaderful—that everyone in the Occupy movement is a leader. That’s a charming move, but the essential point of course is that there is a horizontal, nonhierarchical, and rhizomic quality to the leadership rather than a vertical hierarchy, a party vanguard, or elected or self-proclaimed leaders.

The most frequent objection to this leaderless model is that it simply paralyzes political action and leads nowhere. Žižek gave expression to this complaint with regard to the resistance movement in Greece when he wrote:

In Greece, the protest movement displays the limits of self-organisation: protesters sustain a space of egalitarian freedom with no central authority to regulate it, a public space where all are allotted the same amount of time to speak and so on. When the protesters started to debate what to do next, how to move beyond mere protest, the majority consensus was that what was needed was not a new party or a direct attempt to take state power, but a movement whose aim is to exert pressure on political parties. This is clearly not enough to impose a reorganisation of social life. To do that, one needs a strong body able to reach quick decisions and to implement them with all necessary harshness.<sup>13</sup>

Žižek’s call for “a strong body” that acts with “all necessary harshness” is, of course, the complete antithesis of a leaderless resistance movement—far more reminiscent of a Leninist vanguard party. It is a stark contrast indeed.

It is worth emphasizing, though, that the notion of a leaderless movement may open possibilities—rather than close them. It may serve to resist the crystallization of hierarchy and domination that so often occurs with entrenched power, even well intentioned. There is another passage from

10. Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que la critique?” *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie* 84 (Apr.–Jun. 1990): 39; my trans.

11. See *ibid.*, p. 38; my trans.

12. *OccupyWallStreet*, occupywallst.org

13. Žižek, “Shoplifters of the World Unite.”

Foucault that is useful here. It is from an interview in the late 1970s. When asked whether, after critique, there is “a stage at which we might propose something,” Foucault responded: “My position is that it is not up to us to propose. As soon as one ‘proposes’—one proposes a vocabulary, an ideology, which can only have effects of domination. . . . These effects of domination will return and we shall have other ideologies, functioning in the same way. It is simply in the struggle itself and through it that positive conditions emerge.” It is only by open contestation and struggle that, “in the end,” Foucault suggested, “possibilities open up.”<sup>14</sup>

And it certainly seems that possibilities did open up. The Americas are now engaged in conversation, debate, and soul-searching about inequality and income distribution that were almost nonexistent—under identical economic conditions—in the months prior to the Zuccotti Park occupation. By eschewing old-fashioned partisan politics and ideological debates, new conversations arose—the product, I believe, of this new paradigm of leaderless occupation. Its impact has already been felt, not only on political discourse in the United States today, but also on politics on the ground. It is telling that as soon as the alter-G8 invitation went out—“IN THE TRADITION OF THE CHICAGO 8. #OCCUPYCHICAGO. MAY 1—BRING TENT”<sup>15</sup>—the entire 2012 G8 summit meeting was swiftly moved to Camp David.

Some critics contend that there are de facto leaders in the Occupy movement, such as those who can tweet for Occupy or participate in important committees. Occupy members tend to respond that the committee structure is open to anyone and that leadership positions at general assemblies or for social media rotate constantly. My sense here, though, is that this argument is beside the point. The issue is not whether the Occupy movement achieves perfection—complete leaderlessness—but rather that it embraces an *aspiration* toward the goal of avoiding leaders. The effort to be leaderless, I take it, is a constant struggle. There will always be a tendency toward leadership in political movements. The important point here is not that the movement achieves perfect leaderlessness but that it strives for it.

Interestingly, there are features of Occupy Wall Street—some internal structural elements—that seem to promote the goal. The apparatus of general assemblies, human microphones, and hand signals contribute,

14. Foucault, interview by David Cooper et al., trans. Alan Sheridan, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, trans. Sheridan et al., ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York, 1988), p. 197.

15. Culture Jammers HQ, “Tactical Briefing #25: Showdown in Chicago,” *Adbusters* blog, 25 Jan. 2012, [www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/tactical-briefing-25.html](http://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/tactical-briefing-25.html)

perhaps unwittingly, to the effort. The “human mic,” for instance—as a form of expression, communication, and amplification—has the effect of undermining leadership. The human mic interrupts charisma. It’s like live translation; the speaker can only utter five to eight words before having to shut up, while the assembled masses repeat. The effect is to defuse oratory momentum—or to render it numbingly repetitive. It also forces the assembled masses to utter words and arguments that they may not agree with—which has the effect of slowing down political momentum and undermining the consolidation of leadership.<sup>16</sup>

### Refusing to Play the Game

Another contentious aspect of the movement has been its resistance to formulate demands or to coalesce behind a single, unified message. “Where the movement falters,” Nicholas Kristof writes in the *New York Times*, “is in its demands: It doesn’t really have any.”<sup>17</sup> Or as another journalist writes, “unless and until this anger is channeled into something that catalyzes a policy debate, it is not particularly newsworthy.”<sup>18</sup>

Here too, the Occupy movement has been disobedient. It has deliberately resisted what we might call the privilege of choice. Choice—especially rational and calculated choice—is a hallmark of these late modern times. As Renata Salecl poignantly observes in her book *Choice*, the privilege of choice runs deep:

From the late seventeenth century on, the Enlightenment project promoted the idea of choice—giving rise to our modern conceptions of political freedom, the relationship between mind and body, lover and loved, child and parent. And capitalism, of course, has encouraged not only the idea of consumer choice but also the ideology of the self-made man, which allowed the individual to start seeing his own life as a series of options and possible transformations.<sup>19</sup>

16. For an interesting discussion of the human mic along these lines, see Michael Greenberg, “In Zuccotti Park,” *New York Review of Books*, 13 Oct. 2011, [www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/nov/10/zuccotti-park/?pagination=false](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/nov/10/zuccotti-park/?pagination=false)

17. Kristof, “The Bankers and the Revolutionaries,” *New York Times*, 1 Oct. 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/10/02/opinion/sunday/kristof-the-bankers-and-the-revolutionaries.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/02/opinion/sunday/kristof-the-bankers-and-the-revolutionaries.html)

18. Quoted in Arthur S. Brisbane, “Occupy Wall Street: How Should It Be Covered Now?” *New York Times*, 4 Nov. 2011, [publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/04/occupy-wall-street-how-should-it-be-covered-now/?scp=1&sq=occupy%20public%20editor&st=cse](http://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/04/occupy-wall-street-how-should-it-be-covered-now/?scp=1&sq=occupy%20public%20editor&st=cse)

19. Renata Salecl, *Choice* (London, 2010), p. 19.



The sovereign, choosing self is at the heart of the liberal conception of Western society.<sup>20</sup> No wonder there would be so much pressure for the Occupy movement to make demands, to stake out policy reforms. No wonder so many would try to impose meaning on the movement or to appropriate it—to give it direction, to give it meaning, to give it coherence.

But the Occupy movement resisted. Why? It's impossible to speak for the movement, but it was no doubt, paradoxically, a strategic choice. The resistance to formulating demands allows for wider participation, for a movement with people of—in its own words—many “political persuasions.”<sup>21</sup> Resisting choice unifies rather than fractures. It also avoids producing a set of demands that can easily be met yet amount to nothing. As we know far too well, good policy reforms can easily be diluted through amendment, revision, and technicalities that ultimately produce more loopholes than solutions.

The Volcker rule is a perfect illustration—and, not surprisingly, one of those “specific suggestions” that Kristof proposed “for those who want to channel their amorphous frustration into practical demands.”<sup>22</sup> The Volcker rule began with a three-page letter to the president by Paul Volcker, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, proposing a simple rule that would ban proprietary trading by commercial banks. Soon enough, in the hands of Congress, it expanded to ten pages of legislation with the passage of the Dodd-Frank Act. Those ten pages then multiplied thirtyfold and got “truffled” with loopholes. When the proposed regulations finally reached the public, the *New York Times* reported, “the text had swelled to 298 pages and was accompanied by more than 1,300 questions about 400 topics.”<sup>23</sup> Even Volcker was no longer really in favor of it. “I don't like it, but there it is,” Volcker said. “I'd write a much simpler bill. I'd love to see a four-page bill that bans proprietary trading and makes the board and chief executive responsible for compliance.”<sup>24</sup>

It is precisely the trajectory of a policy proposal like the Volcker rule that might give one pause. The Occupy movement's resistance to simple demands was a strength. One of the posters at Zuccotti Park read “Resist To Exist.” The moment of resistance—of pure resistance, of disobedience—

20. See F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom: Text and Documents*, ed. Bruce Caldwell (Chicago, 2007), p. 238.

21. *OccupyWallStreet*, [occupywallstreet.org](http://occupywallstreet.org)

22. Kristof, “The Bankers and the Revolutionaries.”

23. James B. Stewart, “Volcker Rule, Once Simple, Now Boggles,” *New York Times*, 21 Oct. 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/business/volcker-rule-grows-from-simple-to-complex.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/business/volcker-rule-grows-from-simple-to-complex.html?pagewanted=all)

24. Quoted in *ibid.*

was the pulse of the Occupy movement. That was the moment when the movement declared, we will not be governed like this anymore.

### The Discipline of an Occupation

Angela Davis said that the true goal of the Occupy movement is to “(Un)Occupy”: to *stop* occupations around the globe—especially in the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> Tom Mitchell, in his marvelous essay on “The Arts of Occupation,” explores the paradoxical naming, the trope of *occupatio*. “The demand of *occupatio* is made in the full knowledge,” Mitchell writes, “that public space is, in fact, *pre-occupied* by the state and the police, that its *pacified* and democratic character, apparently open to all, is sustained by the ever-present possibility of violence.”<sup>26</sup>

The Occupy movement, no doubt, riffed on the different connotations of *occupation*. There is a certain doubleness here. It is especially apparent in the movement’s relationship to discipline. General assemblies have orderliness, process, and rules. There are facilitators with designated jobs and stocktakers. There is an order, an imposed orderliness. There are common hand signals with designated meanings. A triangular hand signal raises an issue of process. The rolling arms mean they’ve heard enough. Interventions need to be short. There is the possibility of a block. The human mic controls. “Mic check, mic check”—the “mic check” becomes a command, an order, a call to attention. And the rules are enforced by the subtle pressure of the assembled group.

I have witnessed discipline at work at both Zuccotti Park and Occupy Chicago. Quite impressive—subtle, forceful, based on an overwhelming sentiment of shared purpose. At a general assembly in Zuccotti Park on the evening of 24 October 2011, the drummers reluctantly but willingly agreed to limit their drumming hours, and the extreme voices at the edges of the consensus were silenced; the shipping committee cajoled the gathered protesters into agreeing to a monthly contract with the local UPS Store at \$500 per month despite reservations that it’s a “corporate” account. At a teach-in at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on 2 December 2011, a protester began challenging one of the speakers, asking questions out of turn about Stalin’s purges, repeatedly interrupting the conversation, breaking the order of “stack.” The other protesters started by asking him to respect the process and to put himself on stack. He continued to heckle the speaker. The others started to shout him down and eventually asked him to

25. See Angela Davis, “(Un)Occupy,” in *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America*, ed. Carla Blumenkranz et al. (New York, 2011), p. 132.

26. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation,” *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Fall 2012): 10.

leave. There was unison in the room—a shared sense that the rules needed to be respected. There was enforcement brought to bear on the disorderly protester. He was excluded from the gathering. The conversation resumed.

Christopher Berk, a doctoral student at the University of Chicago, spent several nights in Zuccotti Park at Occupy Wall Street from 22 to 25 October 2011 as a participant observer. On the third night, Berk joined the security committee for its evening patrol on the midnight shift and patrolled a section of the park from 12:00 a.m. to 3:30 a.m. on the morning of 25 October. Within Zuccotti Park, which is only 3,100 square meters, there were four “hotspot” areas outlined that morning. In Berk’s area alone—one of the four sections—there were four to five incidents that required intervention, including one fight, two or three verbal altercations, one theft, and one mental-illness-related incident. These included the expulsion of at least one protester. Here is an extract from Berk’s field notes:

12:05 a.m. 5 minutes after shift begins! Increasingly loud yelling, threats, arguing from west side of camp (Liberty and Trinity, near card playing table). Someone yells “security!” Start running over. First one there. 2 people, 1 is extremely drunk. One (will call him “A”): visibly drunk, stumbling, stained white t-shirt, age late 20s. Other (“Cowboy”): skinny, mid-30s, wearing a cowboy hat. Within 10 seconds about 6-8 other members of security group converge. Men separated and encircled by security group. I’m in the group talking with “Cowboy.” He’s very anxious and angry. Pointing a finger, periodically continues to shout at “A.” Head of the watch shift starts asking questions about the incident. “Cowboy” explains that “A” attacked a girl in the camp. Other witnesses clarify and verify: “A” was seen grabbing a girl’s arm and shouting epithets. Community watch group asks “A” to leave the camp. Explained behavior is absolutely not tolerated. Escorted out. Hour later, “A” comes back. Tells security he doesn’t have anywhere else to sleep—he’s escorted back in, told he can sleep it off, then must leave in the morning. “A” passes out on mat. I’m asked to keep an eye on him for the rest of the shift. Doesn’t stir.<sup>27</sup>

An occupation requires discipline. It calls for committee structure—open to all, to be sure—general assemblies, websites, Twitter accounts, UPS deliveries, teach-ins, libraries, medical units, and volunteer lawyers. In Chicago, it even calls for a “Soup Brigade” (courtesy of dedicated elderly

27. Christopher Berk, unpublished field notes.

women in Hyde Park).<sup>28</sup> An occupation is not just a protest or a march. And this one, clearly, was an experiment in real time—exploring new forms of social organization and trying out new ways of governing itself.

### A New Grammar

A leaderless occupation without demands: It is almost as if our language never caught up with this political phenomenon. The new paradigm of political disobedience challenges our very grammar. It calls for a new way of speaking about politics. It demands a more careful syntax.

To begin with, no one can speak for Occupy Wall Street.<sup>29</sup> As a leaderless movement, no individual has the authorial voice to represent the movement or make demands on its behalf. It is not even clear that the movement can legitimately delegate its voice to anyone. The resistance can only be heard, syntactically, from its place of occupation, and only then, I take it, through the coordinated voice of the assembled masses—or via the general assemblies. Any normative statements about what the Occupy movement should do only make sense from their site of occupation.

In other words, to produce an effective normative statement *about* Occupy Wall Street—about what the movement should do—the speaker needs to be physically occupying Wall Street. And not just physically present, but occupying that site, in the sense of having a self-imagination that they are part of the resistance movement. What it takes to occupy, grammatically speaking, does not necessarily require a tent or sleeping bag nor even a poster (though that surely helps), but a self-conception that one is protesting. Mere presence does not even suffice. The journalist on the beat, the visiting tourist, the police officer patrolling the park, or the politician claiming to be responsive to the protesters' demand—none of these would be occupying unless they took the further step of conceiving of themselves as part of the resistance movement. (But even here the self-conception cannot be policed in a conventional way. It is not as if anyone could go up to a person at an Occupy protest and tell them that they are not part of the occupation if they genuinely believe that they are.)

What this implies, first, is those who theorize the Occupy movement—anyone who is trying to understand the movement, as I am here—cannot

28. Dawn Turner Trice, "Soup Is on, in Solidarity with Occupy Chicago: Too Old to Camp out, Three Hyde Park Women Find Their Own Way to Support Occupy Chicago," *Chicago Tribune*, 7 Nov. 2011, [articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-11-07/news/ct-met-trice-occupy-1107-20111107\\_1\\_protest-campaign-senior-citizens-streeterville](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-11-07/news/ct-met-trice-occupy-1107-20111107_1_protest-campaign-senior-citizens-streeterville)

29. In this regard, I was struck by the *Financial Times* editorial having the byline "Occupy London" rather than the names of the three members of the economics committee; see David Dewhurst, Peter Dombi, and Naomi Colvin, "How Hayek Helped Us to Find Capitalism's Flaws."

speak with authorial voice on behalf of or for the movement, since they are, at the moment, *outside* the movement. This makes it difficult to understand exactly what they are saying. A lot of their formulations—as thinkers *about* the movement—no longer work or can be heard entirely well. This is especially true when they mix in advice.

So, for instance, when Peter Hallward contends in the editorial pages of *The Guardian* that “we will need . . . to convert the polemical clarity of the new slogan—‘we are the 99%’—into a commanding political standpoint,” somehow the syntax doesn’t work; it is not clear who “we” are in this statement nor whom Hallward is addressing.<sup>30</sup> Are “we” assembled protesters on the internet, readers of the paper, “leaders” of a movement, or critics? My sense is that this kind of statement, especially in the form of an editorial in *The Guardian*, is somehow inaudible and slightly meaningless.

This applies equally to the critics and commentators of the movement—whose syntax no longer seems to fully work. When for instance Kristof argued in the *New York Times* that Occupy Wall Street should get an agenda<sup>31</sup> or when the *Wall Street Journal* disdainfully remarked that the movement should stop engaging in “days of feckless rage,”<sup>32</sup> their statements did not fully make sense; it is as if their grammatical formulations cannot be heard properly given the leaderless paradigm of the new resistance movement. They sound like the inaudible noise in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*—or, perhaps more familiarly, the mwa, mwa, mwa that adults make in Charlie Brown cartoons.

The grammatical problems trace, first, to a spatial issue. Normative statements about Occupy Wall Street—claims about what the movement should do—are functionally inaudible unless the speaker is physically occupying an occupation. Hallward cannot *audibly* tell anyone what Occupy Wall Street should do—any more than the *Wall Street Journal* could—unless Hallward is physically occupying an Occupy space. And you can’t occupy sitting at your computer, publishing an editorial, or writing in this journal. You cannot occupy at a distance from an occupation.

The problem, second and connectedly, is rhizomic. Because the movement is leaderless, there is no one to speak to apart from the assembled protesters at an Occupy site; and there is no way to speak to the resisters

30. Peter Hallward, “Occupy Has the Power to Effect Change,” *The Guardian*, 22 Nov. 2011, [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/22/occupy-movement-change](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/22/occupy-movement-change)

31. See Kristof, “Occupy the Agenda,” *New York Times*, 19 Nov. 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/opinion/sunday/kristof-occupy-the-agenda.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/opinion/sunday/kristof-occupy-the-agenda.html?_r=2)

32. “Revoluting the Masses,” *Wall Street Journal*, 21 Nov. 2011, [online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203699404577044583038468266.html](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203699404577044583038468266.html)

unless the speaker situates him or herself as a member of the resistance movement.

But there is a third dimension to the problem—an authorial issue. The conventional sentence structure of the type “People should do xyz” rests on a claim of authority that no longer seems to hold. It is as if time-honored forms of knowledge and expertise no longer grammatically produce truthful statements. The contention from an economist, a politician, a columnist opining about what Occupy Wall Street must do to succeed is no longer fully meaningful because the authors of those sentences themselves have failed, as evidenced by the 2008 financial debacle. Those who are trying to steer the Occupy movement in the right direction—whether in good or ill will—have already run aground, and, as a result, there is no authority to their statements.

The syntactic difficulties extend, I think, within the movement and affect the women and men occupying. The proper noun *Occupy Wall Street*, *Occupy Chicago*, or *Occupy London* as subject term sounds confusing coming out of their mouths, compared to the pronoun *we*. “We should do xyz” is far more “hearable.” The reason is that it doesn’t make sense for someone at Zuccotti Park, Grant Park, or St. Paul’s to talk about the Occupy movement as an object independent of themselves and the other persons occupying the site. Objectifying the movement is a bit like talking about oneself in the third person; it sounds presumptuous. It somehow excludes or resists self-identification. For a protester to say “Occupy Wall Street” rather than “we” communicates that the speaker is not assuming membership in the resistance movement and thereby not occupying the political space.

These new grammatical forms open up the political space to multiple voices, views, and opinions—to a multiplicity of what the movement calls political persuasions. For instance, someone occupying might say that they are pro-union, without the resistance movement itself being pro-union. Others may object and argue that unions are hierarchical institutions that crystallize new forms of oppression. In this sense, one could imagine hearing a large group of Occupy protesters arguing for union bargaining in Wisconsin, but it would not “make sense” for anyone to say that “Occupy Wall Street is pro-union.” The grammatical structure of that sentence would not work.

The new syntactic disorder allows for a convergence of multiple views and an overlap of sometimes mutually exclusive ideas, without an exclusionary mechanism operating. There can be progovernment protesters next to antigovernment protesters, for instance, without the resistance movement needing to adjudicate between them. All those statements can

be heard, as long as the authors are physically present, occupying, self-identifying, and voicing their opinions in terms of “we.” Of course, a leaderless movement could not enforce any of these new syntactic formations, but that’s hardly an issue. Grammar works through who is heard and what makes sense, far less (except in grade school) by means of policing.

### “We the People”: The Myth and Democratic Challenge

Judith Butler exclaimed at Occupy Wall Street that “we’re standing here together making democracy, enacting the phrase ‘We the people!’”<sup>33</sup> That’s a bold statement—a real reappropriation that raises deep questions about that collective myth.

In an odd way, it almost feels as if the Occupy movement has it harder than other contemporary resistance movements—dare I say, than even the Arab Spring revolutions. The resisters in the Arab world faced (and still today face in militarized Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere) brutal authoritarian regimes and risk (and many lost) their lives. Their courage is unmatched and has been an inspiration around the world. On that count, they have stared down a far more violent and oppressive adversary than anyone else.

But they *had one*. They have an identifiable adversary—oppressive and authoritarian regimes—that they can target, that they can topple. They had and have a concrete goal, grievances, an objective, demands, and a vision for reform all wrapped into one. They can resist until the authoritarian regime cedes power. The protesters in the Arab world have had a cruel advantage.

By contrast, what the Occupy movement itself has revealed is that there really is nothing to overthrow in the United States. In Egypt, there was President Mubarak’s regime, and now the military establishment. In Tunisia, the people could oust the longtime President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. In Libya, there was Colonel Mu’ammr Gadhafi. In Syria, there is president Bashar al-Assad. Even in Europe today, the political resistance movements aim at specific targets. In Greece, there are the Germans and French, their austerity measures, and the International Monetary Fund. But, in the United States, there is nothing to topple and no one to oust.

With political elections every two to four years, the populace can send their politicians packing, but nothing really seems to change. There are moments of victory and defeat—of celebration and mourning. For some, it was Grant Park on election night in November 2008; for others, it was two years later in 2010. There are times of utter triumph and loss, feelings of ecstasy and despair. And, yet, little changes. Incarcerated populations

33. Judith Butler, “Remarks at Zuccotti Park, October 23,” *Occupy!* p. 193.



continue to grow. Inequality continues to increase. The Democratic years and the Republican years fade into each other and into the steady, plodding march toward massive incarceration and growing inequality. Only state bankruptcy and a brutal recession seem to slow down prison growth today and perhaps only temporarily.

The genius of democratic structures of governance is that there are no targets anymore. There is no monarch, no tyrant, no dictator. By cutting off the king's head—not just metaphorically or methodologically as some had urged us to do, but physically—we, “we the people,” so diluted accountability and attribution that we are left unable to find a target to engage, politically. *We* have become the tyrants. It is ingenious, devilishly.

Think about it. The four hundred wealthiest Americans have a combined net worth greater than 150 million Americans. Once upon a time, they would have been marked as nobility: aristocrats. They would have had titles; their social and political relations would have been marked by feudal or aristocratic legal hierarchies. Relations of power would have been legally recognized. Just as we had slave codes for black slaves in the antebellum period, or black codes for African Americans during Reconstruction and Jim Crow, there would have been distinct legal regimes for these four hundred wealthiest Americans at some earlier time.

But not today. We are all equal before the law. We are all—well, practically all—citizens, with “equal” voting rights, with “equal” civil rights. Again, not all—not certain felons who have been disenfranchised or those too poor or uneducated to be able to comply with our administrative hurdles. But extending the franchise here, and equally importantly fighting against insidious forms of voter suppression—noble endeavors indeed—are practically irrelevant when a handful of Americans control such massive resources. The partisan system, dual party politics, Congressional debates, presidential elections—there is neither anything to overthrow nor any way out. That, I take it, is part of what was being said at Occupy Wall Street.

### Outlawing Dissent

The forcible police evictions of Occupy protesters in New York, Chicago, Oakland, DC, Montreal, Toronto, Berlin, and elsewhere raise critical questions about political speech and genuine First Amendment concerns.<sup>34</sup> It is indeed ironic to think that the president-elect was making his

34. See Bruce Ackerman and Yochai Benkler, “Occupying the First Amendment,” *Huffington Post*, 21 Oct. 2011, [www.huffingtonpost.com/bruce-ackerman/occupy-wall-street-first-amendment-\\_b\\_1023709.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bruce-ackerman/occupy-wall-street-first-amendment-_b_1023709.html)



political victory speech under a tent in Grant Park “after hours” on the very park where his former chief of staff—mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel—would direct the police to *arrest* Occupy protesters.

The contrast three years earlier could not have been greater. In Grant Park on election night 2008, huge tents were pitched, commercial sound systems pounded rhythms and political discourse, enormous TVs streamed political imagery. More than 150,000 people blocked the streets and occupied Grant Park—congregating, celebrating, debating, and discussing politics. That evening, president-elect Barack Obama addressed the crowds late into the night, and the assembled masses swarmed the park to the early morning hours. It was a memorable moment, perhaps a high point in political expression.

The low point would come three years later, almost to the day. On the evening of 15 October 2011, thousands of Occupy protesters marched to Grant Park and assembled at an entrance to the park to engage, once again, in political expression. But this time the assembled group found itself surrounded by an intimidating police force, as police officers and wagons began lining up around the political assembly. The police presence grew continually as the clock approached midnight. Within hours, the Chicago Police Department began to physically arrest the protesters for staying in Grant Park beyond the 11:00 p.m. curfew in violation of a mere park ordinance.

The police could have issued written citations and moved the protesters to the sidewalk. In fact, that’s precisely what the police would do a few weeks later at a more obstreperous protest by senior citizens. But not on 15 October or the following Saturday night. Instead of issuing citations, the police physically arrested over three hundred protesters, placed them in handcuffs, treating the municipal park infractions as quasi-criminal charges, booked them, fingerprinted them, and detained them overnight in police holding cells, some for as many as seventeen hours, and then continued to aggressively prosecute the cases.

To make matters worse, the Chicago mayor would follow up the three hundred arrests by enacting draconian antiprotest laws. Under the guise of preparing for the upcoming NATO and G8 summit meetings, the city would tighten its authoritarian grip on speech. Almost as if he was following the script from Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine*—as if he was reading her account of Milton Friedman’s Chicago Boys as a cookbook recipe, rather than as the ominous episode that it was<sup>35</sup>—Emanuel successfully exploited,

35. See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York, 2007), pp. 59–87.

in record time, the fear of summit violence to increase his police powers and extend police surveillance, to outsource city services and privatize financial gains, and to make permanent new limitations on political dissent. It all happened—very rapidly and without time for dissent—with the passage of rushed security and antiprotest measures adopted by the city council.

As Friedman wrote in *Capitalism and Freedom*: “Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function . . . until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.”<sup>36</sup> Or, as Emanuel is reported to have said in 2008: “Rule one: Never allow a crisis to go to waste. . . . They are opportunities to do big things.”<sup>37</sup> In this case, Emanuel gave himself the power to marshal and deputize—I am exaggerating—the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the United States Department of Justice’s Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), and the entire United States Department of Justice (DOJ)—as well as state police (the Illinois Department of State Police and the Illinois attorney general), county law enforcement (State’s Attorney of Cook County), and any “other law enforcement agencies determined by the superintendent of police to be necessary for the fulfillment of law enforcement functions.”<sup>38</sup> “The final catch-all allow[ed] Emanuel to hire,” Andy Thayer wrote, “anyone he wants, be they rent-a-cops, Blackwater goons on domestic duty, or whatever.”<sup>39</sup>

City governments cracked down on the Occupy movement across the country, and some municipalities, like Chicago, enacted draconian anti-protest laws to quiet dissent. It is almost as if our political leaders feared the Occupy movement might lead to revolution.

#### A Fourth Left

Eli Zaretsky’s *Why America Needs a Left* tells a distinctly American story about a succession of radical social movements in the United States—from slavery abolitionists, to populist, labor, and socialist movements leading to the New Deal, to the civil rights and New Left protests of the 1960s. Zaretsky paints

36. Milton Friedman, “Preface, 1982,” *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago, 2002), p. xiv.

37. Quoted in Jeff Zeleny, “Obama Weighs Quick Undoing of Bush Policy,” *New York Times*, 9 Nov. 2008, [www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/us/politics/10obama.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/us/politics/10obama.html?pagewanted=all)

38. City of Chicago, *Ward 49* website, “Substitute Ordinance,” [www.ward49.com/site/files/322/6327/335275/592046/G8NATOSub.pdf](http://www.ward49.com/site/files/322/6327/335275/592046/G8NATOSub.pdf)

39. Bernard Harcourt, “Outlawing Dissent: Rahm Emanuel’s New Regime,” *The Guardian*, 19 Jan. 2012, [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/jan/19/outlawing-dissent-rahm-emanuel-new-regime](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/jan/19/outlawing-dissent-rahm-emanuel-new-regime)

a history of recurring, deep, structural crises—nineteenth-century slavery, turn-of-the-century laissez-faire capitalism, post-war-finance-led globalization, and the cold war—each of which would regenerate a Left that would formulate renewed demands for equality along racial, socioeconomic, and civic-political lines.

Zaretsky identifies a fourth structural crisis today—corresponding to what many of us call the current neoliberal predicament. He ends his book with a timely question: “Is it possible to build a fourth American left?”<sup>40</sup>

Occupy Wall Street writings that have emerged from the movement, as well as some recent studies of social movements more generally, point strongly to the affirmative. Catherine Corrigan-Brown’s *Patterns of Protest* is particularly enlightening in revealing the magnitude of political activism in America today: almost a full two-thirds of Americans have participated “in a social movement organization or attended a protest at some point in their lives.”<sup>41</sup> Some have begun to call the United States a “social movement society” (quoted in *P*, p. 16). And this growing political activism is likely to compound; studies of 1960s protesters find that political mobilization has long-lasting effects. These activists “continue to espouse leftist attitudes, define themselves as liberal or radical in orientation, and remain active in contemporary movements and other forms of political activity” (*P*, p. 42).

Robert Putnam’s notorious diagnosis of the demise of civic participation is only half the story, apparently. Americans may be bowling alone but marching together. Political activism is greater today than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. The May ’68 protests may have garnered more attention, but, as Corrigan-Brown shows, “protest levels in the United States and other modern industrial democracies are considerably higher today” (*P*, pp. 133–34).

The Occupy movement provides strong evidence of a renewed and emerging Left. As a form of raw protest and resistance, of pure critique, of “political disobedience,” the Occupy movement has tapped a deep well of solidarity, of passion, and community and has provoked a wide-scale political reawakening. Drawing on successful recent mobilizing strategies, the Occupiers cobbled together—in a form of bricolage that resembles their tarped tents and cardboard posters—a unique mix of rhizomic leaderlessness, consensus-based general assemblies, and spatial occupations, and avoided the kind of divisive internecine battles that so often have

40. Eli Zaretsky, *Why America Needs a Left: An Historical Argument* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 15.

41. Catherine Corrigan-Brown, *Patterns of Protest: Trajectories of Participation in Social Movements* (Stanford, Calif., 2012), p. 16; see also p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *P*.

immolated the Left. This movement may well be, in Noam Chomsky's words, "a significant moment in American history."<sup>42</sup>

In the process, the Occupy movement has opened possibilities that many no longer believed existed. That is, at least, the palpable feeling one gets reading the texts emerging from the movement—the numerous, short, moving interventions. It is what you hear, for instance, in the voice of Manissa Maharawal in *Occupy!*—a delicious collection of essays by Occupiers—as she rides her bike home after an intense debate at Occupy Wall Street over issues of racism, classism, and patriarchy:

*Later that night I biked home over the Brooklyn Bridge and I somehow felt like, just maybe, at least in that moment, the world belonged to me as well as to everyone dear to me and everyone who needed and wanted more from the world. I somehow felt like maybe the world could be all of ours.*<sup>43</sup>

This palpable feeling pervades the personal accounts. You hear it so vividly in Michael Taussig's essay "I'm so Angry I Made a Sign."<sup>44</sup> A deep current of emancipation, of liberation, of renewed hope, and of political and spiritual reawakening runs through the stories. It is as if political disobedience engenders an emotional or psychological state of open possibilities. In their preface to *Occupy!* the editors note:

The genesis of this book is that we were lucky enough to be in New York, and in America, at the start of the occupations of public ground that began in September 2011. We started as participant-observers . . . . As time went on, we became observers more explicitly. Something was unfolding, which was becoming one of the most significant and hopeful events of our lifetime.<sup>45</sup>

This idea—"one of the most significant and hopeful events of our lifetime"—runs through the personal accounts like a leitmotif. There is a palpable element of exuberance in the collective assemblies, in the communal sharing, in the lived experiences of the Occupiers. "What unified this disparate throng was a tangible sense of solidarity, a commitment to the cause of the occupation, but also an evident commitment to each other," the Writers for the 99% recount in their "inside story" of Occupy Wall Street. "It was not unusual for food packets of cookies or pretzels, or

42. Noam Chomsky, "Occupy, a Forum," *What Is Occupy? Inside the Global Movement* (New York, 2011), p. 62.

43. Manissa Maharawal, "Standing Up," in *Occupy!* p. 40.

44. See Michael Taussig, "I'm so Angry I Made a Sign," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Fall 2012): 56–88.

45. Astra Taylor et al., preface to *Occupy!* p. vii.

bottles of water to be passed hand-to-hand around the rows, shared by strangers who had just become comrades.”<sup>46</sup> There was an overwhelming sense of community.

The Occupiers found pleasure in protest, too. The dancing ballerina, the drumming circles, the mimes, the human microphone, the imaginative, hilarious, and haunting posters . . . *the posters, God they are so good!* This mix of humor, anger, poetry, and politics is so inspiring. “Money talks—too much. Occupy!” reads another poster, with a belt on the bull’s muzzle.<sup>47</sup> “They piss on us and call it trickle down.”<sup>48</sup> “I’m Not a Hippy I Have 3 Jobs But I’m Still Broke.”<sup>49</sup> “When Injustice Becomes Law Resistance Become Duty.”<sup>50</sup> The mix of playfulness and sincerity, of anger at injustice, is overwhelming—deeply refreshing and motivating.

There is indeed a strong sense of community, but also of each person’s place in the collective—whether they are homeless, struggling, working, or privileged. There is keen awareness of race, class, and gender. The Writers for the 99% describe a tactic they call “*step up/step back*”; the concept is for “those requesting time to speak to consider whether they might ‘step up’ by recognizing their relatively privileged role in society at large and cede the floor, or ‘step back,’ to allow someone from a group with traditionally less opportunities to have their voice heard” (*W*, p. 30). There are lengthy engagements with the socioeconomic dimensions of occupation—especially within Zuccotti Park, where there was even talk of an “Upper East Side”—and efforts to address these tensions. And, throughout, there was a desire to not allow the politics of class to eclipse issues of identity, or vice versa, but to work toward an integrated notion of class and identity politics—in the manner of Lisa Duggan’s brilliant book, *Twilight of Equality*.

Why America needs a Left, in Zaretsky’s view, ultimately turns on the relationship between radical Left movements and the more liberal democratic mainstream. On Zaretsky’s account, *both* need each other: “Without a left, liberalism becomes spineless and vapid; without liberalism, the left becomes sectarian, authoritarian, and marginal.”<sup>51</sup> The first is surely true—and, sadly, in evidence today. But the second part of Zaretsky’s claim is less accurate. Truth is, there’s hardly ever been a time in American history without a liberal mainstream. All the major political crises trig-

46. Writers for the 99%, *Occupying Wall Street: The Inside Story of an Action That Changed America* (New York, 2011), p. 26; hereafter abbreviated *W*.

47. Sarah Resnick, Sarah Leonard, and Taylor, “Scenes from an Occupation,” *Occupy!* p. 94.

48. Taussig, “I’m so Angry I Made a Sign,” p. 62.

49. Niki Saval, “Labor, Again,” *Occupy!* figure reproduced on p. 113.

50. Maharawal, “Standing Up,” figure reproduced on p. 39.

51. Zaretsky, *Why America Needs a Left*, p. 2.

gered both a liberal response and a more radical Left one. In practically all of the cases (except for brief periods), the radical elements lost out—which is also true in Europe, as evidenced by the eclipse of the Levellers in England in the aftermath of the civil war and of course, eventually, of the Jacobins in France.

No, the “sectarian, authoritarian, and marginal” tendencies of prior Left movements cannot be attributed to the absence of a liberal mainstream. They are, rather, a distinctive propensity of the Left—or, at least, of the various Lefts in the past. One of the most striking features of the Occupy movement is precisely the lengths to which it has gone to avoid these pitfalls.

The Occupy movement deliberately resists sectarian and authoritarian tendencies—which has prompted, not surprisingly, criticism from both the more militant on the Left and traditional mainstream liberals. By specifically resisting the urge to formulate policy demands, to endorse party politics, or to embrace the worn-out ideologies of the cold war, by strenuously pushing back against efforts to empower particular individuals or small vanguard groups, by insisting on the primacy of pure resistance, outrage, and political protest, by allowing all voices to be heard—at the risk of cacophony—the Occupy movement has very deliberately cultivated a nonsectarian, nonauthoritarian ethos. As the Writers for the 99% emphasize, “Zuccotti Park is home to both proponents of specific reforms such as reinstating the Glass-Steagall Act, and revolutionaries calling for the complete overthrow of capitalism, or indeed an anarchistic abolition of all hierarchies in American government and society” (*W*, p. 61).

The most striking feature of Occupy remains this palpable sense that something meaningful has happened. “We found each other,” Naomi Klein writes.<sup>52</sup> “That sentiment captures the beauty of what is being created here. A wide-open space (as well as an idea so big it can’t be contained by any space) for all the people who want a better world to find each other. We are so grateful.”<sup>53</sup> Chomsky adds, “I’ve never seen anything quite like the Occupy movement in scale and character.”<sup>54</sup>

In the end, the character and scale of the Occupy movement is inextricably linked, I believe, to this new form of political engagement: political disobedience. And if that term makes any sense, if it bears any resonance, then those who have occupied and the many other politically disobedient will continue to resist—to resist making policy demands, to resist conven-

52. Klein, “The Most Important Thing in the World,” *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*, ed. Sarah van Gelder et al. (San Francisco, 2011), p. 45.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Chomsky, “Occupy, a Forum,” p. 62.

tional politics, to resist worn-out ideologies from Hayek to Maoism and all their pale imitations, from the Chicago School 2.0 to Alain Badiou's and Žižek's attempts to shoehorn all political resistance into a "communist hypothesis."<sup>55</sup> They will continue to politically disobey because levels of social inequality in this country and the number of children in poverty are intolerable. The Volcker rule, debt relief for working Americans, a tax on wealthy estates—those policy reforms may help in the immediate short-term (before they rapidly turn into loopholes), but they represent no more than drops in the well of governance and regulations that inevitably distribute and redistribute wealth and resources in this country every minute of every day. Deregulation, more regulation, communism—those terms tell us nothing about how wealth and resources are really distributed in society. Ultimately, what matters to the politically disobedient is the kind of society we live in, not a few policy demands or ideological slogans.

55. See Alain Badiou, *Circonstances: L'Hypothèse communiste* (Paris, 2009).