

Baby, We're All Anarchists Now

Malcolm Harris

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I got a certain amount of shit for cosigning this Crimethinc. “Letter from Anarchists” to occupiers, but what really strikes me is that anarchists and occupiers have become two distinct—albeit overlapping—groups. It’s become even more apparent in the streets. When I was at Occupy DC over the weekend, a guy who I would guess circles his A’s complained about being pushed from the street into the police-protected march by another occupier. I’ve seen the same thing happen in New York, and I’m willing to bet it’s happened elsewhere. There have been rumors out of Chicago that some occupiers have printed out flyers with the names and pictures of “known anarchists,” and certain committee members at Wall Street have grumbled about rooting out autonomous actors. In this context, the Crimethinc. letter seems restrained:

“Don’t assume those who break the law or confront police are agents provocateurs. A lot of people have good reason to be angry. Not everyone is resigned to legalistic pacifism; some people still remember how to stand up for themselves. Police violence isn’t just meant to provoke us, it’s meant to hurt and scare us into inaction. In this context, self-defense is essential.

Assuming that those at the front of clashes with the authorities are somehow in league with the authorities is not only illogical—it delegitimizes the spirit it takes to challenge the status quo, and dismisses the courage of those who are prepared to do so. This allegation is typical of privileged people who have been taught to trust the authorities and fear everyone who disobeys them.”

What’s most frightening, besides snitching among occupiers, is that these marshals and peacekeepers are acting in the name of the occupation. When they yell or push at people to get them to stay walking on the sidewalk like tourists, they invoke a structure bigger than themselves, one that has supposedly empowered them to do so. To trouble this representational claim, I want to go back to a beginning: the first planning meeting for the September 17 action that would become Occupy Wall Street.

To be honest, I got guilted into going by a friend, otherwise I wouldn’t have bothered responding to a call from *Adbusters* and going into lower Manhattan for a meeting. The people who had prepared for the meeting were a coalition of non-profits, established activist coalitions, and a certain socialist organization. Despite calling it a “general assembly” supposedly modeled

on the Spanish protests, they had a microphone stand and an agenda of speakers. Some of us were bored, and having sat through too many of these audience-less press conferences in the past decade, weren't able to fake the necessary enthusiasm. A group of mostly strangers wandered to the entrance of the park a little ways away from the microphone and sat down. We traded names and started to chat about why we were there. After a few minutes, we were drawing the audience away from the microphone. One of the coalition organizers came and begged us to rejoin the group, and we grumbled and walked back over. But it quickly became apparent nothing was about to change, so we returned to our circle and began a facilitated meeting.

At first we had five, then 15, and then the microphone meeting had collapsed and the whole group had joined the circle. It shouldn't surprise anyone who's experienced with leftist activism that the group of discontents included a bunch of anarchists and anti-authoritarians who are used to a certain horizontal process of talking and decision-making in a group. It's called consensus, it often involves twinkling fingers to signal agreement, and it's useful for deciding things like "Which park should we occupy?" The basis for that first meeting, for the sequence of events, was a walking away from organizers. By now consensus and the oft-mocked twinkling fingers have become part of a common language on the left, but now some people without a background in the process are using it as a means of control.

Autonomous action has been the engine of Occupy Wall Street, providing what Hendrick Hertzberg describes as two of the three "shots of adrenaline" — the third coming from a deranged senior police officer. Instead of providing a basis for discourse and autonomous action, the General Assembly has become a tool of imposed accountability, treating consensus as if it were a way to implement policy upon a population. In addition to the police, occupiers now have to worry about getting harassed or undermined by self-appointed guardians of the non-violent movement. Try chanting something that deviates from the friendly universalist "99%" line and see what happens.

Listen: I think your permitted sidewalk march is cowardly, boring, and harms the sequence's revolutionary potential, but you don't see me shoving anyone into the street.

Now don't fucking touch me or any of my friends, the cops can manage that all by themselves.

Representative politics asks people to act through their name, whether as a vote (for a politician, a union rep, etc.) or as a protesting signature. Non-representative politics, (under which I group anarchists, autonomists, anti-authoritarians, anti-political negationists, various insurrectionary communists, and ultra-leftists of a few stripes) is premised on the necessity of acting with your body itself, whether through your legs, arms, vocal chords, fingers, whatever. The latter is threatening as hell, especially to the professional left which is thrust into the conservative position of defending its requisitioned authority. Witness the giant anarchist-shaped aporia in Jodi Dean's call for professional revolutionaries to protect the occupation from Democrats and Ron-Pauliens.

These managers are making a classic mistake, which is informed by the way the left has come to think about leaders. People who feel comfortable taking on managerial roles tend to think the folks they're managing are more afraid and less militant than they are themselves. It's always the masses that aren't ready. As Dean writes: communists at Wall Street should "not push too quickly for something for which the proper support has not yet been built." The potential action here isn't doing, it's "pushing" others. Maybe people will never be ready to get pushed around in the name of not getting pushed around anymore.

The standard argument at this point is that non-representative politics sounds nice, but that it's tactically or strategically unfeasible. Unfortunately, that's not really a defensible argument since the left has finally broken into the national consciousness by adopting the tactics, strategy, and slogans of a group of left-communist insurrectionaries at the Universities of California. So the new explanation, as offered by Todd Gitlin (seriously, who in the hell rang his bell on this one?) is that we did it on accident: "Having set out to be expressive, the anarchists have found themselves playing, willy-nilly, a most strategic role." He's confusing the people who have adopted an anarchist process (which is everyone involved) and the folks who have been building this analysis for a while.

Not to go all Glenn Beck on you, but *The Coming Insurrection* and a bunch of other similar texts did get passed around the autonomist left in America in the last three or four years. We're not talking about "expressive" drum-circle denizens here, these are people who have built and are acting according to a revolutionary analysis. But it's not just theory nerds and self-identified anarchists who ignored the frantically waving marshals and got arrested; *Take the bridge!* is an accessible message and it was produced by the opportunity. We certainly didn't need a French pamphlet to figure that one out.

And what is it exactly people want to do with their unrepresentable limbs? The capitalists aren't so sure it's the non-violent shuffle:

"An online 'Occupy Threat Center' created by ListenLogic says the company's analysis of 'over one million social media posts' indicates a significant increases in all of the following:

- Social media activity from Occupy supporters and activists promoting physical destruction and violent action.
- Direct and specific threats from Occupy 'hactivist' groups against specific financial and law enforcement targets.
- Social media posts, videos and images targeting: financial institutions that issue mortgages and student loans and that initiate foreclosures; corporate entities that received bailout money or government subsidies; companies that pay high executive salaries or bonuses; and companies perceived to be paying extremely low taxes.

ListenLogic is detecting, he says, a change in the tone of discourse about the so-called 1 percent richest Americans.

There still are postings that talk about taxing the 1 percent more severely or even throwing them in jail. 'But then,' says Schiavone, 'there's an increase in 'let's kill' them. We see 'eat the rich,' 'kill the wealthy.' There are images circulating of senior executives being decapitated, images of blood. Artists are releasing images of banks on fire.'"

The managers keep people in check, but we've achieved real gains when the occupation broadly considered shakes off its representatives and sets to our task with our own hands. We're already seeing the power that comes with a more horizontal process, don't let leaders fuck that up by assuming representative roles.

And stop pushing back onto the sidewalk.

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