

REVIVING CLASS DISCOURSE IN THE LANGUAGE OF OCCUPY WALL STREET

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Though often derided as a “moment” rather than a “movement,” the Occupy Wall Street protests and their rhetoric helped to revive class consciousness in mainstream American politics. Though such consciousness was present in the American leftist radical tradition since its inception, the compounding influences of neoliberal ideology, a conservative “neo—Victorian” understanding of equality, and capitalist patriotism following 9/11 made engaging with class politics untenable throughout the 2000s. Occupy’s discourse identified inequality, encouraged direct participatory democracy, and emphasized imagination as inherently revolutionary acts, creating a vocabulary with which to recenter class in mainstream American politics and subsequent leftist movements.

Class consciousness pervades the United States’ radical tradition. Whether it is articulated as fulfilling egalitarian promises in the nation’s founding documents or demanding further material equity, only Black liberation holds a similarly prominent place in the history of leftist organizing. Hardly static, the Left’s class rhetoric evolves throughout its organizing history, both in response to the inclusion or exclusion of certain identities and in the face of conservative repression. The early 2000s saw both of these dynamics stifle class—conscious rhetoric in mainstream politics. Successful “culture—war” conservative moralism meshed with a widespread endorsement of neoliberal economics and ideology alongside an all—consuming obsession with “national security” to foreclose the rhetoric of class struggle and any substantive vision of social or economic equality. Yet from mid—September to mid—November, 2011, the protests of “Occupy Wall Street” rocked the nation and the world, explicitly acknowledging class struggle and forcing it back into mainstream politics. Thus, Occupy was an inflection point for the American Left’s further activism, reshaping popular conceptions of class consciousness, and reviving criticism of the neoliberal economic order.

This article builds on the limited available literature analyzing Occupy Wall Street as a historical phenomenon. Todd Gitlin’s *Occupy Nation* provides an invaluable survey of the protests, though his 2012 publication could not cover the myriad of Occupy—inflected political movements we see today.¹ Most subsequent scholarship is the purview of social movement theory spearheaded in legal and

¹Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street* (New York: It Books, 2012), 200.

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sociology journals.² My work analyzes primary sources published in Sarah van Gelder's "This Changes Everything," including collaboratively—produced declarations by the protest's General Assembly and personal accounts by key participants. Inspired by George Schulman's work in "A Tocqueville for Our Time," I connect the themes expressed in Occupy's rhetoric to the founding documents of past Leftist/liberationist organizations and work by historians Michael Kazin and Joseph McCartin.³ By examining the Occupy protests as both a meaningful innovation *in* and a product *of* the American radical tradition, I reveal the moment's importance in reviving mainstream class consciousness and its vital legacy in the 2010's major protest movements.

Lies, Hate, and War: How to Silence the Working Class

Though Occupy's revival of leftist class rhetoric is highly significant, it is almost more surprising that such rhetoric—which features prominently throughout American radical history—had to be revived at all. The Knights of Labor, People's Party, and Farmers Alliance wielded polarizing, quasi—Marxist class rhetoric throughout the late 1800s to emphasize the theft inherent in wage labor and the harmful role of speculative investment.⁴ Socialists and Christian leftists carried on this tradition of class antagonism to maintain a visible and influential, if not widely elected, Socialist Party into the 20th century.⁵ Though the Communist Party USA achieved its' greatest successes in the 1920s and 30s by organizing under other banners (National Negro Congress, American Student Union, and especially the Congress of Industrial Organizing [CIO]), its members articulated an inclusive* framework of class struggle which linked racial and economic discrimination.⁶ This class emphasis carries over into post—WW2 organizing. No discussion of the 1960s and 70s Black Liberation movement would be complete without Malcolm X's indictment of capitalism for its dependence on slavery and black oppression,⁷ the

² Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2017), 320; John L. Hammond, "The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street," *Science & Society* 79, no. 2 (April 2015): 288—313..

³ George Shulman, "A Tocqueville for Our Time," *Raritan* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 77—96.

⁴ People's Party, "Omaha Platform (1892)," in *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian (New York: New Press, 2003), 316—19; Knights of Labor, "Preamble (1878)," in *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian (New York: New Press, 2003), 308—11; Michael Kazin, "The Rise and Fall of Populism" (PowerPoint presentation, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., September 19, 2022); Michael Kazin, "The Labor Question in the Gilded Age" (PowerPoint presentation, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., September 14, 2022).

⁵ Michael Kazin, "The Heyday of American Socialism" (PowerPoint presentation, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., September 26, 2022); Eugene Debs, "Jesus, the Supreme Leader.," *Progressive Woman*, March 1914.

⁶ Michael Kazin, "The Paradox of American Communism, 1920s—1950s," in *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 211—12; Angelo Herndon, "You Cannot Kill the Working Class (1937)," in *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian (New York: New Press, 2003), 429—36.

* The CPUSA did not seriously endorse feminist or women's liberation movements until 1945. For more information, see Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 220.

⁷ Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet (1964)," in *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian (New York: New Press, 2003), 478—90.

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Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Black Panther Party's demands for economic justice,⁸ or civil rights titans Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King Jr's acknowledgement that economic institutions were key pillars of systematic oppression.⁹ Never forget that King himself explained in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that the "crisis" and "tension" caused by strategic economic damage was the crux of nonviolent direct action.¹⁰ The 1960s New Left may have seen itself as more of a lived, ideological revolution than its predecessors, but its members' resentment towards the amorphous "Man" of corporate elites and capitalists throughout the movement's evolution shows it was continuously undergirded by class consciousness.¹¹ Such resentments were shown to still be alive and well at the "Battle of Seattle" in 1999, where a coalition of unions, environmentalists, international rights groups, and anarchists protested the WTO's exploitative trade policies. Why then, with this extensive history of class rhetoric in American leftist protest, did it seem to disappear from most political dissent?

Lies: No Alternative to Neoliberal Order

As the Left's rhetoric, class or otherwise, evolves and adapts throughout its history, so does the rhetoric of the privileged interests who oppose it. Neoliberalism, an extensive political—economic project begun in post—war Germany but institutionalized under the Carter and Reagan administrations (1970s—80s), ushered in a wildly successful political discourse to justify its economic principles. According to this rhetoric, deregulation, corporate consolidation, privatization of social services, and an aggressively militaristic foreign policy would create a self—balancing free market governed by each individual's identity—neutral, value—maximizing decisions.¹² Agnostic of individual identity, this meritocratic free market would ensure that all individuals were treated with a *formal* equality, rendering any sort of equitable redistribution according to race, gender, class, or other marginalized identities merely

⁸ Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton, and Bobby Seale, "What We Want, What We Believe (1966)," in *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian (New York: New Press, 2003), 499—503; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), "What We Want (1966)," in *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian (New York: New Press, 2003), 490—99.

⁹ Martin Luther King, "A Time to Break Silence (Declaration Against the Vietnam War)" (Speech, Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967); Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary*, February 1965; Martin Luther King, "Black Power," in *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community?* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1968), 33.

¹⁰ Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963)," in *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian (New York: New Press, 2003), 455—6.

¹¹ Michael Kazin, "The New Left" (PowerPoint presentation, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., November 2, 2022); Students for a Democratic Society and Weathermen, "Bring the War Home (1969)," in *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian (New York: New Press, 2003), 638—43; Students for a Democratic Society and Tom Hayden, "The Port Huron Statement (1962)," in *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition*, ed. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian (New York: New Press, 2003), 586—99.

¹² Gary Gerstle, "The Rise and Fall(?) Of America's Neoliberal Order," *Royal Historical Society (London, England), Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 28 (December 2018): 241—264.

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an inefficient exercise in “sharing... scarcity.”¹³ Thus, neoliberal political discourse sidelines experiences of discrete and intersectional oppression, the cornerstone of a Leftist or liberationist position, through this uncritical assumption of formal equality. One of neoliberalism’s most prolific ideologues, Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in 1989 that a neoliberal United States was the “final form of human government,” one that transcended “all prior contradictions” of racial unrest or class struggle and left only “economic activity” between equal microeconomic actors.¹⁴ Therefore, the only rights the state needed to ensure were those ensuring the continuous flow of capital and legitimizing its use of force. Social and economic equality would be guaranteed by the market.

Such blind cosmopolitanism became “hegemonic” across political parties as the Clinton administration—guided by the corporatist Democratic Leadership Council—ushered in a new era of Democratic politics, championing free trade policies and promising to “end welfare as we know it” while curtailing their support for the redistributive policies won by the Civil Rights movement.¹⁵ The Clinton administration did not deny inequality but rather redefined the “deserving” and “undeserving poor” to substitute rights—based social policy with microfinance and market—based policy initiatives that “[saw] collateral in a person’s character.”¹⁶ This neoliberal discourse undergirds Keeanga—Yamahtta Taylor’s discussion of the “colorblindness” myth in contemporary politics, which absolves the state of any responsibility to racial minorities by asserting that discrimination cannot exist in a free market.¹⁷ Thus, with both major political parties subsumed by the language of meritocracy and privatization, any sort of class—conscious rhetoric was shouted down as “class warfare.” The neoliberal lens, which had been successfully imposed onto mainstream political discourse, immediately foreclosed any conception of class struggle under the assumption that, in the free market of the Land of Opportunity, such classes were only separated by individual effort.

Hate: Culture War and Conscience under Capitalism

As neoliberal ideology pervaded mainstream politics throughout the 80s and 90s, conservatives did not accept it with entirely open arms. Tragically, their adaptation to this new rhetorical project further alienated working—class struggles. Fundamentally opposed to any neoliberal notion of cosmopolitanism insofar as race, gender, or sexual orientation, remnants of anti—busing, anti—gay, and anti—ERA rhetoric that had flourished under Nixon and Reagan began to synthesize into a vocabulary and moral framework which reconciled formal equality, market deregulation, and moral traditionalism. Promulgated by neoconservatives including (but not limited to) Gertrude Himmelfarb, Charles Murray, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the resulting “neo—Victorian” conception of individual morality advocated for almost Social—Darwinian conditions under which families would produce “self—reliant, disciplined and virtuous individuals.”¹⁸ Such morality was, of

¹³ Arthur Laffer, “Taking the Side of Supply: His Program Will Bring a Prosperity All Will Share,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1981, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3—5.

¹⁵ Gerstle, “The Rise and Fall(?),” 261.

¹⁶ Lily Geismer, “Agents of Change: Microenterprise, Welfare Reform, the Clintons, and Liberal Forms of Neoliberalism,” *Journal of American History* 107, no.1 (June 2020): 122, 129.

¹⁷ Keeanga—Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 16—17.

¹⁸ Gerstle, “The Rise and Fall(?),” 260.

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course, complete with racial—nationalist presuppositions that certain races and genders were better able to fulfill American ideals, resulting in a chimeric construction of “liberty” under which any state provision of “welfare, abortion access, gay marriage, or secularism” would infringe upon one’s “God—given...right to conscience.”¹⁹ A pinnacle of formal equality, this neo—Victorian “liberty” was satisfied by only limited guarantees on civil rights, assuming that individual equality was circumscribed by civic systems and agnostic to economic or social power. Thus, the effect of economic or social power on political participation is ignored as well as the consequences of such socio—economic inequality that fall outside a narrow view of civic life, including racial discrimination, gendered violence, and material deprivation. As neoliberalism rendered class consciousness unthinkable, the prevalence of this neo—conservative morality provided a hefty counterweight to any calls for substantive equality, economic or otherwise.

War: “They Hate Our Freedom”

Compounding the corrosive cosmopolitanism of neoliberal thought and the rhetorical monopoly on “liberty” held by neoconservatives, the Bush administration's demand for ideological unity further marginalized productive class discourse in the wake of 9/11. The resulting “demonolog[ical]” language used to describe the Al—Qaeda hijackers (as well as an unrelated group of countries branded as the “Axis of Evil”) made two implicit leaps that would cement further barriers to popular discussions of class struggle.²⁰ First, global capitalism became an inextricable appendage of democracy threatened by the same radical enemy.²¹ As President Bush proclaimed “free markets and free trade and free societies...demonstrate that the forces of terror cannot stop the momentum of freedom,” free spending and the continued celebration of unregulated markets became a prolific symbol of one’s patriotism and commitment to worldwide democracy.²² Therefore, any criticism of neoliberal capitalism or its insidious rhetoric came to be seen as traitorous. Second, if the terrorists were coming for our economic prosperity, that must mean such prosperity exists in the first place. “Equality” went from an aspiration to a given, the star—spangled virtue envied and undermined by foreign enemies who “[seek] to destroy our freedom.”²³ Under this frame, inequality simply was not conceivable in an America that had not yet fallen, thus robbing any Leftist argument against existing inequality of its urgency and perceived relevance.

The Language of Occupy

Highlighting Inequality

When Occupy Wall Street shook the nation in September 2011, it brought with it a radical new discourse around the very concept of “equality.” In the previous

¹⁹ Shulman, “Tocqueville,” 78.

²⁰ George W. Bush, “2002 State of the Union Address” (Speech, US Capitol, January 29, 2002).

²¹ Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 414.

²² George W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union” (Speech, US Capitol, January 29, 2002); Gary Gerstle, “Hubris,” in *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 205.

²³ US Department of State, “The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days,” White House Counterterrorism Reports (Office of Electronic Information, Bureau of Public Affairs), accessed December 7, 2022.

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decade, equality had taken on a largely passive connotation when it was evoked by neoliberals, neoconservatives, national security hawks, and every other shade of political activist. Rhetorically, it was something already achieved by the nation's founding documents and the bygone struggles of the Civil Rights era. Yet as George Shulman explains, "Equality is a politically radical and generative idea only if considered in direct relation to inequality."²⁴ With this caveat, we can understand the "equality"—inflected rhetoric espoused by neoliberals, neoconservatives, and President Bush as actively undermining the "radical and generative" dimensions of such a promise. For any class—conscious, rights—based, or redistributive discourse to permeate mainstream politics, it would need a particularly potent meme to put profound *inequality* back into the national conversation. In its call to action and continued rallying cries, Occupy did exactly this with "We are the 99%."

The origin of the 99% vs. 1% meme is nebulous, but Joseph Stiglitz's "Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%" is usually credited with cementing the language's popularity among protestors. In the March 2011 article, Stiglitz spells out the undeniable existence of devastating economic inequality, using both existing economics and immanent critique to explain why "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" is more than just a useful aphorism. Citing continuously falling middle—class incomes and aggregate wealth, he reverses the notions of prosperity and exceptionalism fostered by the War on Terror by comparing America's rising cost of living and youth unemployment to the underlying conditions of the Arab Spring. Problematizing Bush's association between democracy and equality, he compares American income inequality to that of "our closest counterparts...[:] Russia with its oligarchs and Iran," emphasizing that the success of American capitalists is not the success of the rest of the American people or the nation as a whole.²⁵ By highlighting this disconnect, he exposes the contradictions inherent in the formal equality espoused by neoliberals and conservative populists. Unchecked economic inequality, he explains, forecloses the opportunities of less—wealthy people to live fulfilling, productive lives, which in turn erodes any sense of shared American identity defined by "fair play, equality of opportunity, and a sense of community."²⁶ But crucially, Stiglitz emphasizes that this economic disparity erodes not just a shared identity but the very civic equality upon which the nation prides itself. Stiglitz illustrates the "self—reinforcing" domination of the American political system by monied interests and the profound suffering it has—and will—cause. He evokes preferential tax laws, unregulated monopolies, deregulated industry and investment banking, interest—free government loans to financial institutions, the *Citizens United* decision, and the inherent moral hazard of wealthy politicians representing (*or declaring war on behalf of) a 99% to which they do not belong. In doing so, the plight of the 99% became an easily accessible complement to Occupy's call for equality, empowering the discourse to be, as Shulman puts it, actually "radical and generative" rather than an empty formal idiom.

The rhetorical reclamation of "equality," which Stiglitz's article popularized, continued to permeate throughout the movement's literature. The "Occupy Wall Street" slogan began with a July 2011 issue of *Adbusters*, a Canadian anti—corporate magazine, which focused Occupy's initial protests on the civil disparities caused by economic inequality, expressed as "the influence money has over our representatives

²⁴ Shulman, "Tocqueville," 80.

²⁵ Joseph E. Stiglitz, "Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%," *Vanity Fair*, March 31, 2011.

²⁶ Stiglitz, "1%."

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in Washington.”²⁷ By immediately identifying “**Wall Street, the financial Gomorrah of America**” (bold in original) as “the greatest corrupter of our democracy,” *Adbusters* rooted the movement in the inequality inherent in unregulated economic power and the resulting broken promises of American civic equality.

Though *Adbusters* exercised no further control over the protests, Occupy’s calls for justice and political change remained grounded in this theme of the 99%’s unequal power. The “Declaration of the Occupation of New York City,” a statement of grievances produced collaboratively by protestors at Zuccotti Park’s General Assembly, is almost entirely devoted to naming Wall Street as their enemy and enumerating violations of the global 99%’s civic, social, and environmental opportunities by the 1%’s economic power. By affirming that “no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power,” protestors made the experience of their own unequal economic power intrinsic to their professed goal of “true democracy.”²⁸ The Assembly’s “Principles of Solidarity,” produced by the same General Assembly six days before the “Declaration,” is similarly focused. The document’s first lines call out “political disenfranchisement” caused by “blatant . . . social and economic injustice,” leaving no ambiguity as to what was being protested.²⁹

The “Experience (and Power) of Freedom as Participation”

As Occupy Wall Street’s founding documents grounded its calls for enfranchisement in opposition to the lived inequality of the 99%, the “Principles of Solidarity” expresses that protestors should respond to such adversity with assertions of their own individuality and autonomy. It identifies members of Occupy as “autonomous political beings” engaged in the reclamation of both public space—as inspired by their forebears in Tahrir Square and Puerta del Sol—and “direct and transparent participatory democracy.”³⁰ The “Declaration of the Occupation” made a similar call, insisting that the rights through which the 99% could “assert [their] power” over the 1% were “to peaceably assemble, occupy public space, [and] create a process . . . in the spirit of direct democracy.”³¹ This emphasis on autonomy, community building, and direct participation mirrors analyses of democratic participation by Hannah Arendt and Alexis de Tocqueville, particularly Arendt’s articulation of the “revolutionary treasure.” Shulman summarizes this intangible “treasure” as “the experience (and power) of freedom as participation,” keeping revolutionaries true to their ideals through the conviction that “egalitarian means are democratic ends in the making,” thus exercising such egalitarian ideals as ends unto themselves.³² Any compromise—whether to obtain “state recognition” or satiate themselves with the rhetoric of “equal opportunity” over material gains—signifies a loss of the “revolutionary treasure,” the very freedom for which the revolution started

* With this lens of class conflict, Stiglitz makes a more visceral and, incidentally, more accurate critique of the War on Terror than those of the 2003 anti—war movement, reviving the class—based objections of anti—Vietnam protest.

²⁷ “8th Anniversary of #OccupyWallStreet,” *Adbusters*, July 13, 2019.

²⁸ New York City General Assembly, “Declaration of the Occupation of New York City,” in *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*, ed. Sarah van Gelder (Oakland: Berrett—Koehler Publishers, 2011), 15.

²⁹ Working Group on Principles of Consolidation, “Principles of Solidarity,” in *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*, ed. Sarah van Gelder (Oakland: Berrett—Koehler Publishers, 2011), 8.

³⁰ Working Group on Principles of Consolidation, “Solidarity,” 8.

³¹ New York City General Assembly, “Declaration,” 16.

³² Shulman, “Tocqueville,” 89—90.

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in the first place.³³ While Arendt and Tocqueville both grounded their analyses in the “town—hall meetings” and “citizen councils” of the 18th—century American Revolution, this focus on participation and uncompromised egalitarianism has precedent in the American radical tradition.³⁴ The International Workers of the World (IWW), a radical anarcho—syndicalist labor union formed in Chicago in 1905, proclaimed separation from all political parties, universal leadership, and individual solidarity according to an extremely literal interpretation of “an injury to one” being “an injury to all.”³⁵ The IWW mobilized more than 150,000 workers in 1917 alone, engaging in wildcat strikes and free—speech civil disobedience until the murder of key organizers by corporate vigilantes amidst intense government persecution under the Espionage Act.³⁶ The organization's success stemmed mainly from its willingness to organize unskilled and transient workers as equal members, a stark contrast from contemporary craft unions like the American Federation of Labor who disregarded such workers.³⁷ The New Left of the 1960s put similar emphasis on participatory democracy, seeing the success of the SNCC's voter registration drives as evidence that activists must be directly involved in obtaining their rights.³⁸

Knowing this history, we can now see Occupy's virtuous endorsement of mass participation as a revival of radical tradition. Beyond hammering on the existence of inequality, Stiglitz's “Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%” suggests the revolutionary power inherent in a spurned, maltreated 99%, alluding to an approaching reckoning in America that would mirror the uprisings of the Arab Spring. He predicts that soon—just like the “ruling families” of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain—America's corporate elite will “look on nervously from their air—conditioned penthouses” and will be “right to worry” whether “they [will] be next.”³⁹ Such international focus expands the frame of the global 99% articulated in the “Declaration of the Occupation,” keeping “Occupy” and its anti—usterity/anti—globalization cousins from being locked to a specific region. Though not quite as foreboding, *Adbusters'* original call to “#OccupyWallStreet” is also explicitly international, looking to the Tahrir Square (Egyptian) and Puerta del Sol (Spanish) occupations as instructions. From the outset, Occupy activists relied on “How to cook a non—violent #revolution,” a handbook produced by 15—M activists in Puerta del Sol, to guide their General Assembly.⁴⁰ Included in *Adbusters'* internationalism is a featured quote by Prof. Raimundo Viejo, a Spanish radical, who affirms their commitment to egalitarian means by rejecting any strategy involving “a wolf who led the pack...and those who followed behind.” Rather, Viejo preaches, “we are one big

³³ Shulman, “Tocqueville,” 89; Hannah Arendt Center, “The Spirit of Revolution,” *Medium* (blog), June 14, 2016.

³⁴ Shulman, “Tocqueville,” 89; Hannah Arendt Center, “Spirit.”

³⁵ Industrial Workers of the World, “Manifesto and Preamble (1905 and 1908),” 350—54.

³⁶ Eric Thomas Chester, *The Wobblies in Their Heyday: The Rise and Destruction of the Industrial Workers of the World during the World War I Era* (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger, 2014), xxii; Michael Kazin, “The Watershed of WW1” (PowerPoint presentation, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., September 28, 2022).

³⁷ Jonathan A. Christiansen, “‘We Are All Leaders’: Anarchism and the Narrative of the Industrial Workers of the World,” *IWW Historical Archives*, March 2012.

³⁸ Michael Kazin, “The New Left,” slide 2.

³⁹ Stiglitz, “1%.”

⁴⁰ Andy Kroll, “How Occupy Wall Street Really Got Started,” in *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*, ed. Sarah van Gelder (Oakland: Berrett—Koehler Publishers, 2011), 2—5; “How to Cook a Non—Violent #revolution (v1.0),” *TakeTHESquare* (blog), July 15, 2011; “8th Anniversary.”

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swarm of people.”⁴¹ Each of these documents disavows authoritative leadership, calling for coordination through solidarity rather than centralization to preserve the real treasure of Occupy.

This drive for mass participation was not merely rhetorical; it was the key driver of inter—movement solidarity and diversifying the crowd at Zuccotti Park. As Occupy joined Amnesty International’s September 21st “Day of Outrage” to protest the execution of Troy Davis, activist Marina Sitrin described the connections fostered between the young protestors and their more experienced compatriots, which engendered feelings of both solidarity and the inherent value of every member’s voice.⁴² The verses of “We Shall Overcome” rang through New York’s streets from a legion of Occupiers far more diverse than they had started.⁴³ Occupy’s rallying cry of the 99% was almost impossibly broad in scope, but its egalitarian principles kept its activity at least somewhat responsible to all of its members. Direct participation positively affected the protest’s diversity and inclusion of racial minorities, as corroborated by the experiences of Hena Ashraf and the General Assembly’s South Asian Bloc. An early draft of the “Declaration of the Occupation” contained the insidiously cosmopolitan idea that Occupiers could declare themselves “formerly” divided by race and other identities.⁴⁴ Thanks to the General Assembly’s block system, a group of four activists were able to object to this race—blind language on ethical grounds, constructively criticizing the movement’s outward face and pulling it away from the neoliberal myth of colorblindness.⁴⁵

Sitrin goes on to explain the encouraging effect of democratic participation on Occupy’s protestors, describing her visceral reactions—both physical and psychological—to the six—to—seven thousand Occupiers using a “People’s mic” to address crowds. She extolls the intoxicating quality of the “power of direct democracy moving through your body, along with thousands around you,” to which participants can only react by continuing their discussions of crisis and how to imagine solutions.⁴⁶

Though Occupy Wall Street pointedly avoided leaders, its most widely—accepted philosophical underpinnings were espoused by David Graeber, an anarchist anthropologist, whose interpretation of the General Assembly—as well as his indictment of debt and “Bullshit Jobs”—likely made him the closest thing Occupy had to a figurehead.⁴⁷ In “Enacting the Impossible,” Graeber explains how the General Assembly, Occupy’s closest approximation of administrative infrastructure, was built to encourage participation and empower individual protestors. By using a “block” system that gave every protestor a “veto” on deliberations, the Assembly relied on “perhaps anarchism’s most fundamental principle,” that participants treated with dignity, maturity, and responsibility will rise to the occasion and respond in kind.⁴⁸

⁴¹ “8th Anniversary.”

⁴² Taylor, “Barack Obama,” 185.

⁴³ Marina Sitrin, “The Chills of Popular Power: The First Month of Occupy Wall Street,” in *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*, ed. Sarah van Gelder (Oakland: Berrett—Koehler Publishers, 2011), 9.

⁴⁴ Hena Ashraf, “Claiming Space for Diversity at Occupy Wall Street,” in *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*, ed. Sarah van Gelder (Oakland: Berrett—Koehler Publishers, 2011), 13.

⁴⁵ Taylor, *#BlackLivesMatter*, 16—17.

⁴⁶ Sitrin, “Chills,” 11.

⁴⁷ Gary Gerstle, “Coming Apart,” in *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 253.

⁴⁸ David Graeber, “Enacting the Impossible: Making Decisions by Consensus,” in *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement*, ed. Sarah van Gelder (Oakland: Berrett—Koehler Publishers, 2011), 6.

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Along with such structural encouragement, Graeber lauds popular participation through a novel interpretation of Arendt's thesis of the "revolutionary treasure." Beyond preserving one's motivation to keep marching or one's autonomous spirit while trying to prove that "direct democracy, freedom, and a society based on human solidarity" are possible, he asserts that it is "the act itself of trying to fulfill such principles" which "informs what another world might look like."⁴⁹ In other words, he posits that Schulman's "egalitarian means" are not only essential to maintain a revolution's spirit as ends unto themselves, but that they constitute the tangible product of the revolution in action.

Imagination as a Revolutionary Act

Though the structure of the General Assembly seen at Zuccotti Park was directly informed by international movements, Graeber explains that the sheer scale of Occupy was truly unprecedented. Activists in Spain and Greece had developed the consensus process for use in small affinity groups operating as "spokes—councils." It had never been attempted for an assembly of thousands, like the one expected to pour into New York City. Yet according to their principle of participation as both an end unto itself and the productive engine of revolution, the fledgling process committee made the "wild gamble" of operating the protest by consensus as "the approach that most accorded with our principles."⁵⁰

Such a leap of faith was hardly the first time, but by no means the last, when Occupy Wall Street embodied the politics of imagination as radical dissent from neoliberal ideology. From Fukuyama's uncomfortable, quasi—fascist dismissal of new art and philosophy to Margaret Thatcher's infamous declaration that "There Is No Alternative" to deregulation and austerity, neoliberal rhetoric relies on the foreclosure of artistic or political expression, asserting through the language of microeconomic—informed logic that there is simply nothing else to be imagined after the "end of history."⁵¹ Thus, imagination outside of this corrosive paradigm, including the process committee's gamble on a consensus—based assembly, is inherently subversive to neoliberal political discourse. "According to conventional wisdom," Graeber explains the actual exercise of direct democracy seen at Occupy "shouldn't be possible, but it is happening—in much the same way that other inexplicable phenomena like love, revolution, or life itself (from the perspective of, say, particle physics) happen."⁵² Such actions reclaim the "impossible" by trying to enact the freedom and democracy promised by the American ethos, thereby exposing the emptiness of such promises in the face of economic inequality. Such politics of imagination revive the rhetoric of the 1960s' New Left, which articulated a strikingly similar anxiety: a political discourse taking capitalism for granted would suppress any "viable alternative to the present" and that the movement must "give form to the feelings of helplessness and indifference" in order to even conceive of something better.⁵³

As with the galvanizing effect of popular participation, the revolutionary politics of imagination play out in the testimonies of Occupiers. In his documentation of the 16 Beaver St. meetings which preceded Occupy itself, Andy Kroll illustrates

⁴⁹ Graeber, "Enacting," 6.

⁵⁰ Graeber, "Enacting," 6.

⁵¹ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," 18; Daniel T. Rodgers, "The Rediscovery of the Market," in *Age of Fracture* (Belknap Press, 2011), 60.

⁵² Graeber, "Enacting," 6.

⁵³ Students for a Democratic Society and Tom Hayden, "The Port Huron Statement (1962)," 589, 598.

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the fusion of ideas from Spanish, Greek, Egyptian, and Japanese organizers who brought the General Assembly to New York, disrupting the more traditional modes of organizing present in contemporary American protests.⁵⁴ In addition to the protest's organizational inspiration, Sitrin attributes the longevity and scale of Occupy to "new people...whose imaginations are totally free..., who are angry and simultaneously dreaming of a new world and who cannot imagine restrictions..."⁵⁵ Despite the assumed naïveté of such a statement, Sitrin contrasts these fresh faces against "[activists] with lots of political experience in New York," whose expectations of low turnout or immediate police reprisal would have otherwise limited Occupy's success.⁵⁶ Herself a longtime organizer, Sitrin admits that the scope, scale, and longevity of the occupation grew to such proportions that by September 30th, she could only use the verb "imagine" to describe it.⁵⁷

Beyond these testimonies, the politics of imagination reverberated throughout the movement's signature documents. *Adbusters'* call to action envisioned a "whole new social dynamic" of dissent for the American Left, escaping existing institutions and neoliberal modes of thinking which foreclosed dissent against corporate supremacy. Such a novel dynamic was utterly necessary for "we the people [to] start getting what we want."⁵⁸ Through immanent critique in "Of/by/for the 1%," Stiglitz exposed that the existing tools and theories of economics—cultivated by and for existing institutions (re: the 1%)—do not reflect the 99%'s reality of staggering inefficient, unfair inequality. Though the reference is not as textual as Graeber, Sitrin, or the New Left's esoteric language, the article's punchy first line proclaims that there is "no use *pretending* that what has obviously happened has not in fact happened" (emphasis added), indicating that the soothing platitudes of market economists were an exercise in willful ignorance rather than a meaningful reflection of reality. Never using the word "neoliberal," Stiglitz nonetheless deconstructs the ideology's false egalitarianism by refuting "marginal—productivity theory," targeting the corporate executives who triggered the Great Recession as overpaid burdens rather than the adequately—compensated "job creators" exalted by neoliberals.⁵⁹ Stiglitz's analysis offers revolutionaries, moderates, and laypeople alike an alternative to the professed "common sense" of hegemonic neoliberal theory without the flowery rhetoric of more standard leftist critiques. This makes his work the most subversive—and potentially the most effective—of Occupy's expression of revolutionary imagination.

Stiglitz, *Adbusters*, Kroll, and Graeber all insist that imagination is revolutionary, but the "Principles of Solidarity" enumerate it most succinctly: "We are daring to imagine a new socio—political and economic alternative that offers greater possibility of equality."⁶⁰

Everybody Wants to Change the World

Though Occupy Wall Street may be more accurately categorized as a "moment" rather than a "movement," saying so ought not to be a mark of derision. Yes, the "Occupy" tag only adorns the banners of modern protests as a nostalgic meme, and the 2—month occupation is generally remembered as an exercise in "organizational chaos and indecision," even by its supporters. But by reasserting the

⁵⁴ Andy Kroll, "Occupy Wall Street," 2—3.

⁵⁵ Sitrin, "Chills," 9.

⁵⁶ Sitrin, "Chills," 9.

⁵⁷ Sitrin, "Chills," 10.

⁵⁸ "8th Anniversary."

⁵⁹ Stiglitz, "1%," Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence*, 416.

⁶⁰ Working Group on Principles of Consolidation, "Solidarity," 8.

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rhetoric of equality rooted in inequality, popular participation as an end unto itself, and the revolutionary politics of imagination, Occupy Wall Street revived mainstream class consciousness and transformed American leftist action for the 21st century.⁶¹

The immediate aftermath of 2011's Occupy "moment" saw class discourse return to mainstream political debate as its central theme. The 2012 elections had a new focal issue with President Obama labeling economic inequality, albeit painted with the trappings of "opportunity" rather than "equity," as "the defining issue of our time."⁶² While the Obama and Romney campaigns—both fundamentally neoliberal—hurled hypocritical epithets at each other, the "Fight for \$15" campaign kicked off by the Service Employees' International Union spread across the country in the most significant, successful action by organized labor in the last several decades.⁶³ The Democratic Socialists of America received a flurry of new membership as overtly leftist literature including Thomas Piketty's *Capital for the Twenty-First Century*, the magazines *Dissent*, *Jacobin*, and *n + 1*, and intellectual figures like Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, and Occupy's own David Graeber received a level of attention not seen by leftist academics since the 1940s.⁶⁴ Accompanying this mainstream acceptance of dissenting theory was a similar explosion in academia, particularly in economics and international relations (IR). Though the explicit politics of imagination may be too esoteric for the nightly news, social science journals overflowed with publications challenging established theories, bringing new energy to the "New School" and "constructivist" projects begun decades earlier (not to mention a never ending supply of title—appropriate puns).⁶⁵ Such scholarship was not unprecedented: in the decade before Occupy, modern IR theorists including Kelebogile Zvobgo, Meredith Loken, Amitav Acharya, Srdjan Vucetic, and many others continued W.E.B. DuBois' legacy of centering race and class intersectionality in their intensely—whitewashed discipline.⁶⁶ However, the space created by Occupy's massive popularity meant that these perspectives were much harder to ignore, so much so that in May of 2022, the US Federal Reserve published a paper entertaining neo—Marxist economic theory under a different name.⁶⁷

Nonetheless, Occupy's most salient impact is undoubtedly its legacies in the contemporary organizing of the Black Lives Matter movement. Though the main Occupy protests remained mostly white despite their emphasis on widespread participation, their convergence with the "Day of Outrage" for Troy Davis and the subsequent birth of "Occupy the Hood" made explicit connections between widespread economic inequality and the violent racism of the neoliberal state. Black

⁶¹ Gerstle, "Coming Apart," 254.

⁶² Associated Press, "Economic Inequality an Issue for 2012 Campaign," CNBC, December 24, 2011.

⁶³ Joseph McCartin, "Working in the New Economy" (Powerpoint presentation, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., December 4, 2019).

⁶⁴ Gerstle, "Coming Apart," 254.

⁶⁵ Erik Reinert, Jayati Ghosh, and Rainer Kattel, "Understanding Economic Development and Demolishing Neoliberal Development Myths," *WEA Commentaries* 7, no. 1 (February 2017): 10—12; Nicholas J. Kiersey, "Occupy Wall Street as Immanent Critique: Why IR Theory Needs a 'Mic Check!'", *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies*, no. 5 (2012): 157—60.

⁶⁶ Amitav Acharya, "Towards a Global International Relations?", *E—International Relations*, December 10, 2017, 1—4; W. E. B. DuBois, "The African Roots of War," *The Atlantic*, May 1915; Srdjan Vucetic, "A Racialized Peace? How Britain and the US Made Their Relationship Special," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7 (2011): 403—21; Kelebogile Zvobgo and Meredith Loken, "Why Race Matters in International Relations," *Foreign Policy*, June 19, 2020.

⁶⁷ David Ratner and Jae Sim, "Who Killed the Phillips Curve? A Murder Mystery," *US Federal Reserve*, Finance and Economics Discussion Series, May 20, 2022.

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Lives Matter’s adherence to horizontal organizing and wariness of “old guard” advocacy organizations who did not “get off [their] ass” and “show up” to Ferguson can be understood through the same dynamic of Arendt’s “revolutionary treasure,” which characterized Occupy, encouraging both movements to reject “state recognition or equal opportunity” in favor of material gains.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the naked brutality exhibited by the NYPD onto mostly—white Occupy protestors exposed them as “servants of the...ruling elite” and “shock troops for the status quo,” bringing a further class dimension to later protests against racist police killings.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Keeanga—Yamahtta Taylor, “Black Lives Matter: A Movement, Not a Moment,” in *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, 204; Shulman, “Tocqueville,” 89.

⁶⁹ Taylor, “Barack Obama,” 187.

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