OCCUPY OAKLAND: THE QUESTION OF VIOLENCE

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The explosive growth of the Occupy movement, in the fall of 2011, took everyone by surprise. No movement of the left had possessed such momentum since the antiwar movement of the late sixties and early seventies. As has been widely pointed out, the Occupy movement changed public discourse, making it impossible for the rapidly escalating concentration of wealth and power to continue to be pushed under the rug. The movement was most visible during the fall of 2011 when occupations inspired by, and mostly modeled on, Occupy Wall Street, appeared in cities around the country. By late November and December every occupation had been closed down, leaving Occupy activists to look for new tactics and means of maintaining the momentum of the movement. During the winter months demonstrations continued, but the movement was much less active than it had been: this was in a sense a time of hibernation, a time of intense discussions of what form the movement should take next, what its foci should be.

Many local Occupy movements saw May Day as the moment for the movement to re-emerge in public view, to show that it had not disappeared. The results were inconclusive. In New York, the San Francisco Bay Area and elsewhere, demonstrations planned by Occupy and allied movements drew thousands, but did not reach the size or have the impact of actions of the fall. Occupy activists in many places are demonstrating against banks and corporations, stalling foreclosures and evictions, organizing student protests against tuition increases and mobilizing support for labour strikes. There is no question but that political activism will continue to be central in the lives of large numbers of participants, especially young people, and that networks formed through the Occupy movement will continue to function. Whether Occupy, as a movement with a more or less coherent identity and focus, will continue, is an open question.

The purpose of this essay is not to survey the movement as a whole but to place it in the context of an evolving anarchist-oriented form of radicalism among young people, and to address some of the issues that this movement faces, including the balance between nonviolent tactics and militancy, between a focus on tactics and internal process on the one hand, and on goals and strategy on the other, and the question of how to respond to police violence, through a discussion of two prominent local Occupy movements: Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and Occupy Oakland (OO). My main focus, however, is Occupy Oakland.

The Occupy movement has led to wide recognition of the influence of anarchism on young activists. It has been widely pointed out that anarchist-inclined young activists (including some who avoid using that label but whose perspectives are influenced by the anarchist tradition) have played central roles in initiating the movement and in sustaining it.[[1]](#endnote-1) In fact anarchism, and anti-authoritarianism, closely connected to anarchism, have been ascendant among young radicals in the US -- and elsewhere -- for at least three decades. In the late seventies and eighties, the anti-nuclear activists who blockaded and occupied nuclear plants and nuclear weapons facilities, and who called themselves ‘the direct action movement’, subscribed to a philosophy that blended participatory democracy, consensus process, anarchism, feminism, environmentalism and nonviolence. These components of a political perspective were regarded, by the great majority of activists, as not only mutually compatible but in effect inseparable. The idea was that movements against nuclear power and nuclear weapons would expand into a much broader movement for nonviolent revolution, which would lead to an egalitarian and non-militarist world. This turned out to be vastly overoptimistic. In fact the movement became closely tied to its tactic, direct action, i.e. mass nonviolent actions leading to mass arrests. When such actions reached their limit, having attracted as many people as were, at least at that time, willing to participate, the movement went into decline. But meanwhile many of the movement’s ideas, especially the use of consensus decision-making process, a focus on the creation of egalitarian communities and a deep suspicion of the state, and an association of these perspectives with feminism and more generally with radical politics, had been widely adopted by young activists in other movements.

The next major wave of anarchist or anarchist-oriented youth activism, in the US, was the anti-globalization movement, more accurately described as a movement against global capitalism and the austerity measures associated with it. The radical component of the Seattle protests of 1999-2000 were organized by the Direct Action Network, a coalition of West Coast anarchist and anti-authoritarian groups, part of a broader activist youth culture that inherited much of the outlook of the earlier anti-nuclear direct action movement, but also transformed it in some ways. Issues of race and of racism were more prominent for the anti-globalization movement than they had been for its predecessor, due to rising levels of immigration and the importance of organizing in immigrant communities. Nonviolence, regarded by the earlier wave of activists as inseparable from anarchism, became detached from anarchist politics. The Black Bloc, young people dressed entirely in black, wearing black masks, appeared at the Seattle protests, where they broke windows of corporate chain stores and ran to escape capture by the police. This tactic, inspired by its use at earlier German protests, had also been used previously in the US but never with the media attention that it achieved in Seattle. Some in the Seattle protests pointed out members of the Black Bloc to police in an effort to keep the protest from being tainted by these tactics. Others, who regarded the Black Bloc as a legitimate part of the movement, were outraged by these actions.

In the ensuing debate that took place within the anti-globalization movement, these attempts to stop the Black Bloc were castigated as acts of betrayal of comrades and Black Bloc actions were defended as an element of a ‘diversity of tactics’ ranging from least to the most militant and provocative. Over the course of the nineties nonviolence had ceased to take the form of mass protests and had come to mean small, highly scripted demonstrations, with predictable outcomes. Anti-globalization activists wanted more militant tactics, and many were uncomfortable with the idea of some movement activists placing constraints on the actions of others. At least on a rhetorical level diversity of tactics won this debate, largely due to its ability to make a more convincing claim to radicalism. Though most activists continued to adhere to nonviolence, Black Bloc actions became a regular component of anti-globalization protests, reinforced, in the US, by the regular use of Black Bloc tactics in demonstrations in Europe, in particular Greece, Spain, and Italy, where violent clashes between protesters and police were more accepted by the public than in the US.

The anti-globalization movement, which emerged into public view with the Seattle protests, flourished briefly before being cut short by 9/11. After Seattle, the Direct Action Network, previously focused on the West Coast, went on to mobilize national protests against the World Bank, the IMF and the Republican National Convention, all in 2000. In New York and Washington, DC, Reclaim the Streets protests took place, inspired by the British movement that aimed to regain public space for the public. In New York City a group of activists, many of whom would be among those who would accept the invitation of the anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* and organize an occupation of Wall Street, organized the No More Walls coalition in response to the government bailout of major banks in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. The aim was an anti-Wall Street action in the fall of 2001. September 11th and the atmosphere of fear, and repression of dissent, that followed it, intervened. The attempt to mobilize an anti-Wall Street action collapsed, and the anti-globalization movement, at least in the US, went into decline.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The focus of activism soon shifted to antiwar activity, but after massive protests in the days leading up to the US attack on Iraq, antiwar protest dwindled. In the years that followed the left reached its lowest ebb for many decades. The economic crisis of 2008, the bailouts and the austerity policies that followed raised the same issues as those that had led to the anti-globalization movement but with even more urgency, especially for young people. The wave of tuition increases and student protests, including occupations of university buildings were the immediate background to the Occupy movement, anti-austerity protests in Europe, demonstrations in Madison, Wisconsin, on behalf of the right of public workers to organize, and the Arab Spring all provided inspiration. Media coverage of the Occupy movement helped, but the momentum of the movement, especially in its early days, had more to do with the fact that it spoke to a widely shared concern over an issue that had been festering for years.

In the US, the Occupy movement is the third post-sixties wave of radical, anarchist-oriented politics. Probably only a minority of Occupy activists identify as anarchists; some who identify with the legacy of anarchism call themselves anti-authoritarian instead, concerned that the term ‘anarchism’ has been taken over by a youth culture more interested in alternative lifestyles than in radical politics. Nevertheless it is clear that an anarchist perspective unites many core Occupy activists, and that many more share important elements of it, including its insistence upon egalitarianism, its suspicion of the state and aversion to mainstream institutions and culture, and its emphasis on the creation of alternative communities, intended to be, as far as possible, beyond the reach of the state and mainstream society. New York City and the San Francisco Bay Area, especially Oakland, are both centres of radical youth culture, and Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Oakland both became major centres for the Occupy movement as a whole. Both attracted wide and enthusiastic support. Both faced the problems of how to respond to police violence and repression and how to direct movements that were growing much more rapidly than anyone had expected. Both have suffered the loss of momentum and focus that has affected the entire movement since the widespread closures of occupations in the late fall, and have faced the question of how to maintain a public presence. Since then both have continued to hold demonstrations and have also engaged in a range of organizing projects. In other respects the two movements have taken quite different paths.

The proposal for an occupation of Wall Street on 17 September 2011, by the anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* was taken up by a group of activists, many of them anarchists, who had been meeting for some time to consider actions against the power of finance, and who embraced the slogan of the 99%, put forward by one of their number, David Graeber. They promoted and prepared for, the impending occupation. Marina Sitrin, one of this group of organizers, told me that protest was in the air, and it was clear that many people would come, but no one expected the approximately two thousand who showed up. The *Adbusters* poster for the demonstration had asked, ‘What is our one demand?’ A General Assembly was held in Zuccotti Park, and this question was raised. But so many demands were suggested that a decision was made not to elevate any demand over the rest as the central demand of the movement. The absence of a central demand, or of any official list of demands, became an earmark of the movement, reflecting a widespread preference for diversity and a concern that choosing one demand over others might alienate some participants. Furthermore, some participants, including some of those who facilitated the first General Assembly, oppose making demands on grounds that the solutions must come from the movement, not from those in power. Others in the movement believe that it is necessary to make demands if one wants to bring about concrete changes. But not identifying any central demand was a way of including both perspectives as well as of including a wide range of specific concerns. But wide use of the 99% slogan made it clear that the movement had arisen in protest against the centralization of wealth and power. The protesters camped out in Zuccotti Park, renaming it Liberty Square, and the next day embarked on daily marches to Wall Street.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The police, by overreacting, inadvertently did a great deal to spread the movement. On 24 September, during a march up Broadway, a policeman pepper sprayed several young women protesters who were doing nothing more than standing on the sidewalk. His act was caught on videotape and quickly bounced around the Internet, inspiring indignation and support for the protesters. On 1 October a march of more than 1,000 protesters was trapped on Brooklyn Bridge, where approximately 700 were arrested; some reported having been guided onto the bridge by the police. Those arrested were taken to jail and kept overnight in overcrowded cells. This experience reinforced commitment to the movement. Occupations began to be formed around the country, in solidarity. In New York, nearly daily demonstrations of thousands took place, in solidarity with the occupation, involving students, trade unionists and others, endorsed by student and faculty organizations, trade unions and community organizations. It was clear that the occupation had won very wide support over a very short period.

Several OWS participants and sympathetic observers whom I interviewed told me that a major concern of the movement has been to sustain a mix of militancy and restraint, to express defiance while remaining within the bounds of nonviolence. Carwil Bjork-James, a graduate student organizer and OWS activist, told me that for years many demonstrations in New York were in danger of being smothered by the police, who, he said, would surround the area of a demonstration with barricades, essentially creating a protest pen in which it was impossible to move around; the challenge was to establish ‘a careful mix between commitment to nonviolence and extreme assertiveness’. Sometimes, he said, demonstrators would pick up barricades and move them; sometimes it was possible to evade them. Marches could zigzag in unpredictable ways, staying ahead of the police and thus avoiding being surrounded. It was also important, he said, to maintain a balance between the militant marches associated with OWS itself, and the larger and more controlled marches sponsored by others, such as labour unions and immigrant rights groups, which enabled people who wanted to be confident that they would not risk arrest to participate in the movement.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Alex Vitale, a sociologist who studies the police, also emphasized the importance of maintaining both the militant edge of the movement and the nonviolent posture that has given it moral authority; a mix of the two, he argued, has been crucial to the movement’s influence and to sustaining the wide public support that it won in its early days.[[5]](#endnote-5) OWS, he said, has not engaged in civil disobedience in the staged way that has become familiar, but nevertheless has maintained the moral high ground. ‘It has been clear’, he said, ‘that the protesters have not been attacking the police, it is the police who have been attacking the protesters. This has had enormous symbolic importance. OWS activists are not interested in a street fight, won’t throw things at the police, but might go over and around a police line; a police line is not considered sacred’. The most important feature of the movement, he argued, has been its character of defiance. OWS changed the discourse, he said, not by talking about the 99%, but by the level of defiance of its activities, and because of the degree of police repression brought on by that defiance, but not by violence on the part of the protesters. ‘If major labor unions had called a permitted march about inequality and 10,000 people had shown up’, he said, ‘nothing would have changed. But 500 young people held a march with no permit, walked in the street without police permission, resisted attempts to disperse them, and as a result were met by repressive force. This led to an entirely new moment. This was reinforced a week later when 700 people got arrested under similar circumstances. The occupation itself was an act of defiance’.

Vitale pointed out that despite OWS’s emphasis on maintaining a tone of defiance, care had been taken not to allow a focus on the behavior of the police to divert attention from opposition to the power of the banks and corporations. In the wake of the pepper spraying of protesters and the arrest of 700 on Brooklyn Bridge he and a friend had organized a demonstration against police mistreatment of protesters, not under the aegis of OWS, but in the name of New York labour leaders, intellectuals and artists. Even though the demonstration was not organized under the aegis of OWS, some Occupy activists opposed it on grounds that it might shift the focus of public debate. This, Vitale said, was the first and last demonstration connected with OWS that focused on the police.

The widespread support for Occupy Wall Street was inspired by the occupation itself, a miniature society built on solidarity, equality and mutual care, as well as by the wide resonance of its protest against the concentration of wealth and power. General Assemblies were held virtually every day; anyone, whether or not living in the park, could take part. Decisions were made on the basis of a modified version of consensus process, requiring 90 per cent support for a proposal to be accepted. An elaborate set of hand motions were developed so that participants could express a range of responses to what was said by speakers without the interruption of applause. Since the occupation had no permit, the use of a megaphone was not legal. Since the first General Assembly, on 17 September, the ‘human mic’ had been used as a solution to the problem of gatherings far too large for the voices of facilitators or speakers to carry to their far reaches. The speaker or facilitator would express a thought and pause while those near enough to hear it would repeat it, in unison, so that the words would carry to those further back. The use of the human mic in particular, but more than that of the whole experience -- the occupation, the consensus process, the sense that this was a movement in which everyone had a voice -- was to create a very powerful sense of solidarity.

Matt Presto, a young teacher and OWS activist, told me that General Assemblies have often had an almost unworldly flavor.[[6]](#endnote-6) I had experienced the same in General Assemblies at Occupy Oakland, usually held at dusk, for maximum participation. Especially in a darkening outdoor setting, a General Assembly could feel like a taste of a different world. Occupations that popped up elsewhere tended to model themselves on Occupy Wall Street, adopting, along with the tactic of encampment, the General Assembly, some modified form of consensus process, the hand motions, the use of the human mic. These, together, became the signature of the movement.

Each of these elements of Occupy’s collective identity also has its disadvantages. The human mic, if used consistently, makes meetings twice as long as they would be otherwise, promotes simple, declarative statements that can be repeated easily, and gives the impression of a unity of opinion that does not necessarily exist. Consensus process works well when there is a high degree of agreement but also enables a minority, even a very small minority, to block a position supported by the majority. If every decision has to be approved by a General Assembly, meetings are likely to be long, tedious -- and cold, if held outside, at dusk. The occupations themselves, while providing a glimpse of what a cooperative, non-consumerist society could be like, attracting media attention and making possible virtually 24 hour a day contact between occupiers and the public, also led to problems. They attracted growing numbers of homeless people, to whom they offered greater safety than life on the streets, food, medical care and companionship. The presence of homeless people highlighted the social problems that Occupy was protesting. But homeless people also brought needs, and in some cases mental health problems, that strained the resources of the occupations and often introduced a level of conflict that protesters were not equipped to deal with. By the time the vast majority of occupations were closed down by local authorities, in the late fall of 2011, many political occupiers found their closure a relief.

In the Bay Area, Occupy San Francisco (OSF) was formed soon after OWS. Among the initiators of OWS were activists who had participated in the anti-globalization movement and, in at least a few cases, also in the nonviolent direct action movement of the seventies and eighties; they recommended the use of the General Assembly, consensus process and a commitment to nonviolence, and these were adopted. An occupation established in San Francisco’s financial district became both a mobilizing point for demonstrations against San Francisco’s banks and major corporations, and a magnet for homeless people; soon OSF was providing hot meals for hundreds of people daily, funded by donations. Relatively amicable relations with the San Francisco City Council provided the basis for negotiations over conditions in the encampment. By the time OSF was closed down, on 7 December, it had become largely a homeless camp. Since the closure OSF has continued to organize protests against major banks and corporations. It has demanded that Wells Fargo declare a moratorium on foreclosures and has won the support of the City Council. In April and May, in two separate actions, OSF activists briefly occupied abandoned buildings belonging to the city’s archdiocese, announcing that they planned to use them as havens for the homeless.

Soon after the establishment of OSF word went out among Bay Area circles of mostly young radical activists that a more radical occupation was to be established in Oakland’s Frank Ogawa Plaza, renamed Oscar Grant Plaza by OO activists, in reference to the fatal shooting of Oscar Grant, a young black man, by a policeman in 2009, and to the protests against police violence that had subsequently taken place at the plaza.[[7]](#endnote-7) The Oscar Grant protests had included groups of anarchists and other radicals, which boasted some degree of racial diversity, as well as groups of blacks. In the early days of OO, protest against police brutality was a major theme and General Assemblies were strikingly racially mixed. The Oakland police have a record of violence that is exceptional even at a time when police violence is a problem in many places; the main targets, in Oakland, have been young black men. A focus on police brutality made sense to OO activists who wanted to draw more blacks, as well as other people of colour, into the movement. But there has been a failure to distinguish between effective opposition to police brutality and angry outbursts at the police, a tendency, on the part of many Occupy activists, to equate the latter with radicalism and anti-racism, and to make the unwarranted assumption that such outbursts would find favour with Oakland’s black community.

OO also drew on the recent protests against sharply rising tuition in California’s public universities, especially the wave of university building occupations that took place in 2009. Activists calling themselves Insurrectionary Anarchists, Insurrectionary Communists, or simply Insurrectionists, had played key roles in these occupations. At the time many other activists, some of them anarchists, some not, had questioned the focus on occupations, arguing that such actions were premature, likely to bring severe repression from the university authorities and cut short the growth of a student movement. But the Insurrectionists had a compelling tactic and their critics did not, so the occupations became the centre of the student movement. During the 2009-10 school year demonstrations against tuition increases, and occupations, took place on many campuses, especially California’s public universities where student fees were sharply increased. The student movement died down in the wake of severe repression of the occupations.

Insurrectionists played a major role in the formation of OO and have remained the dominant influence in the movement, although they are only one of a large number of groupings within OO. The Insurrectionists are closer to a social network of like-minded activists than an organization, and in this they are similar to other groupings within the movement. But they have influence beyond their numbers, due to their role in the formation and early days of OO and also their close ties with one another, based, in many cases, on their involvement in the earlier student occupations, and, for some, on experience in protests abroad, especially in Greece; some regard the 2009 anti-austerity riots in Athens as a model that they would like to replicate in the US. The influence of the Insurrectionists, in OO, also derives from the fact they have been the strongest voices for a highly confrontational politics, and for escalation; for many OO participants maintaining and increasing the radical tone of the movement is a high priority.

An OO Insurrectionist told me that the aim of the Insurrectionists is to mobilize spectacular conflicts with the police. The purpose of such actions, he said, is not to defeat the police, which they realize cannot be accomplished in this way, but to ‘send a smoke signal’ to those who would support the Insurrectionists’ revolt, in particular to gang members and street kids, in Oakland and elsewhere. He added that the Insurrectionist movement is split between social and anti-social wings. Social Insurrectionists are willing to join movements that include those of other political perspectives, and understand the problem as capitalism, or, in some cases, industrial society. Anti-social Insurrectionists remain aloof from other movements, and understand the problem as society itself. Insurrectionism has had more influence in OO than in any other occupation, he said, because of the numbers of Insurrectionists in Oakland, and because most of them belong to the social wing. Elsewhere most Insurrectionists belong to the anti-social wing, and do not join movements like Occupy.

Among the tenets of anarchism is a deep suspicion of the state and a strong preference for extra-parliamentary politics, but this does not necessarily entail a hostile attitude toward progressives who engage in electoral politics, or preclude a willingness to make demands upon and negotiate with organs of the state. Carwil Bjork-James told me that Occupy activists don’t want the movement drawn into electoral politics, but that most Occupy activists will vote. He told me that he doesn’t think that electoral politics is the means by which large-scale changes will take place in the US, but he recognizes that there are many people who want such changes who will not join Occupy. ‘If we can’t get them to occupy the streets this year’, he said, ‘I’d be happy if they could swing the election to the left’. He added that not everyone in Occupy is against making demands on the state.

Those of us who are occupying from within institutions, for instance those of us at CUNY, are making some pretty serious demands on public resources. The same goes for people facing student debt and foreclosures. If you want to make a difference in people’s lives, you have to make demands. But if we want to keep Occupy from becoming a support organization for reformist demands, we have to address the question of what our vision is -- is it to keep tuition at the level it’s at, or are our demands connected to a broader vision, for the university as a whole, or for society as a whole? Whatever discomfort people have with the state, there’s close to universal support for more resources for public services, for a politics of public goods.[[8]](#endnote-8)

OO has from its inception been identified with a refusal to engage in contact with elected officials, including members of the Oakland city council, and progressive local politicians. On 15 October 2011, soon after the Oakland occupation had been established, a local coalition of left-liberal organizations held a march in protest against spending for war and cuts to social spending, and in favour of job creation. Plans for the march were initiated long before the occupation took place; it was to end with a rally at Frank Ogawa Plaza. In negotiations prior to the march OO agreed that the rally could take place at the Plaza as long as no elected officials spoke. At the rally a staff member of the progressive, antiwar Representative, Barbara Lee, read a message of support from her. Afterwards an OO activist mounted the flatbed truck being used as a platform and said that OO wants nothing to do with elected officials. Not long after this, the Oakland City Manager sent a letter to OO raising a number of issues having to do with health and safety in the encampment. The letter was discussed at a General Assembly; a debate took place about the question of whether OO should respond to a city official. About two thirds were in favour of responding to the letter; about a third opposed it. But majority support was not sufficient; the modified consensus process required 90 per cent. No letter of response was sent.

Refusal to communicate with elected officials, even progressive ones, is driven by repeated experiences of betrayal on the part of Democratic Party candidates who make promises that they do not deliver; reluctance to work with progressives who engage in electoral politics is driven by a view of electoral politics as a waste of time or worse and/or by the suspicion that progressives who engaged in electoral politics are out to co-opt radical movements. These two views tend to blend together; suspicion of elected officials extends to suspicion of those who engage in electoral politics, especially those who support Democratic Party candidates. The words ‘liberal’ or ‘middle class liberal’ and ‘reformist’ (and also ‘pacifist’) tend to be used as reproaches, and applied widely, often to people who would not describe themselves in these ways. In fact the group that organized the 15 October march had no intention of co-opting OO. The march drew many more people than the organizers had initially expected, because for many who were not prepared to join the occupation, the march was an opportunity to express support for it. There are grounds for the view, held by many young activists, anarchists and others, that the electoral system is broken and that, especially in the absence of more militant forms of protest, elections are not likely to bring about significant social change. But the results of elections nevertheless matter, and a suspicious attitude toward progressive groups that engage in electoral politics deprives OO of potential allies.

Early on the morning of 25 October the Oakland police attacked the Oakland occupation and drove the occupiers out of the camp. That afternoon more than a thousand people, occupiers and supporters, gathered to protest the eviction and to try to retake the camp. The protesters engaged in little if any violence. The police used tear gas and beanbag projectiles, causing many injuries, including a skull fracture in the case of Scott Olsen, an occupier and Iraq War veteran. More than 100 people were arrested. A surge of public dismay at police violence and support for the occupiers prompted city authorities to allow the re-establishment of the occupation the following day. At a General Assembly of more than a thousand, attended by hundreds of supporters as well as occupiers, a ‘general strike’ (actually, a day of demonstrations, supported by a number of labour unions as well as the Alameda Central Labor Council) was overwhelmingly approved, including a blockade of the Port of Oakland; the local International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) chapter had sent word that it would cooperate with a blockade if enough protesters were to picket the entrances.

The General Strike, taking place a week later, on 2 November, brought out upwards of 20,000 protesters, diverse in terms of race, age and occupation. Many working people took the day off to attend; this was especially the case among teachers, as many East Bay schools had let it be known that they would understand if teachers were to call in sick. As demonstrators marched to shut down the port an air of euphoria prevailed. It felt as if the Bay Area left, long in the doldrums, was back. Protesters climbed to the top of cranes and danced. One sign read, simply, ‘Finally’. Other than an ‘anti-capitalist march’ in the mid-afternoon, during which some Wells Fargo and Whole Foods windows were broken, and graffiti was scrawled on walls, the demonstration was non-violent. But in the evening, after the port had been closed and the great majority of protesters had gone home, many activists gathered at an abandoned building near the port, many dressed in black, with black masks. Some entered the building; others started a bonfire in the street. The police arrived, clashes ensued, and over a hundred were arrested.

For some time the encampment remained and General Assemblies remained large. But conditions in the camp were growing more difficult as increasing numbers of homeless people moved in. On 10 November a man was fatally shot just outside the encampment. On 14 November police again evicted occupiers from the encampment. A vigil was established, and General Assemblies, smaller than in the past, continued to be held in the amphitheater next to the grassy area where the encampment had been, but the occupation was not re-established. The focus of OO shifted to organizing demonstrations and to a series of organizing projects, including work with unions to support strikes, support for immigrant rights, opposition to school closures and efforts to stop foreclosures and evictions.

Following the Black Bloc action on the evening of the General Strike a debate raged on the Internet, at General Assemblies, and ultimately, at a public event in an Oakland church, on 15 December, entitled ‘How Will the Walls Come Tumbling Down? Diversity of Tactics versus Nonviolence in the Occupy Movement’, at which eight activists presented their views before an overflowing audience.[[9]](#endnote-9) The framing of the question as a choice between ‘diversity of tactics’ and ‘nonviolence’ tended to confuse the discussion. In fact the issue was not whether the movement should employ diverse tactics or just one tactic -- which no one suggested -- but rather whether Black Bloc tactics, including those designed to provoke police violence, should be employed by the movement. The inclusion of such tactics has often been defended on the grounds that whatever violence follows need not affect demonstrators not engaged in these tactics, as long as they are some distance away from those employing Black Bloc tactics. The problem is that in the heat of a demonstration maintaining such divisions can be very difficult, and even when a Black Bloc action takes place at a different time, its association with the movement can taint the movement as a whole.

In the debate within OO, supporters of ‘diversity of tactics’, meaning Black Bloc tactics, pointed out that breaking windows is violence against property, not against people, as if this point would demolish the critique from the supporters of non-violence. And, unfortunately, it did. Starhawk, one of the speakers at the church debate, a leading activist in the nonviolent direct action movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and since then a nonviolence trainer, pointed out that nonviolence is strategically necessary if one wants to build a mass movement: most people will not attend demonstrations at which there is likely to be violence. Other than one comment from the audience, from another veteran of the nonviolent direct action movement, there was no further discussion of the implications of provoking police violence for attempts to build a mass movement. Many said that they were in favour of occupying vacant buildings, but opposed subsections of the movement calling and carrying out such actions in secret, without the knowledge and involvement of the rest of the movement. It was proposed that in the future such actions would be planned by OO as a whole. This seemed to satisfy the majority. The issue of provocative behavior was not raised.

My impression, in this discussion and others, is that for many OO activists, and for some in other Occupy movements as well, Black Bloc actions are associated with courage, with a willingness to take risks. In OO the Insurrectionists and others with similar views are most likely to participate in Black Bloc actions, but many others do as well. A Black Bloc action does not always involve breaking windows. Sometimes members of the Black Bloc position themselves in the front row of demonstrators, facing the police, so as to shield others. An Occupy activist in Southern California told me that he belongs to an affinity group that participates in Black Bloc actions and is committed to nonviolence. In OO, proposals that the Black Bloc be excluded from the movement have been emphatically rejected by the majority, who regard those who participate in Black Bloc actions as members of the movement, as much as anyone else. There is a widespread view that it is possible to criticize particular Black Bloc actions, but not to call for their elimination or for the exclusion of those participate in them from the movement. And in fact many OO activists have participated in Black Bloc actions at one time or another. I have never heard a discussion of the impact of Black Bloc actions on public support, except on the part of those perceived as marginal to OO. But I have heard the view expressed that the opposition to fighting with the police comes from middle class liberals, or reformists, who in any event do not belong in the movement.

On 12 December 2011, OO held a second port blockade, this one coinciding with blockades of ports elsewhere on the West Coast, and tied to support for an ILWU local in Longview, Washington, engaged in a battle with Export Grain Terminal (EGT), a company that imports grain and other raw materials. The involvement of Occupy with this struggle apparently frightened EGT, which offered to negotiate; a contract was signed. In Oakland, the port shutdown drew around 12,000 demonstrators, a substantial number but many fewer than those drawn by the General Strike, the decrease in numbers due in part to ILWU opposition to the shutdown. Within OO it was argued that OO had the right to override ILWU opposition because the opposition was coming from union bureaucrats, or because the port was public property and Occupy represented the Bay Area movement for social change, or because ‘we are the 99%’. All of these arguments reflected a degree of hubris.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The next major Occupy demonstration, on 28 January 2012, was planned as an occupation of an abandoned building. A committee of OO was established to plan the action; the committee included many who were either Insurrectionists or sympathized with their perspective. The date was announced but other details, including the location of the building to be occupied, were kept secret, in what turned out to be a futile effort to prevent intervention by the police. On 28 January some 1500 to 2000 protesters were led through the streets of Oakland, eventually arriving at the Kaiser Convention Center, under construction and thus empty. Police guarded all of the doors to the Center. Minor scuffles took place and it seemed clear, to me at least, that both sides, protesters and police, were gearing up for a clash, and that the action would not be complete until this took place.

I left, and later heard that the protesters were again led through the streets, in search of another building to occupy, leading to clashes between the police and the protesters. A ‘Fuck the Police march’ was announced; marches of this sort, in which insults are shouted at the police, were by this time taking place weekly. In the evening the police surrounded, and arrested, some 400 protesters. Most were released from prison early the next morning, but many of the arrestees, as well as others, were left asking what had gone wrong with the planning of the intended occupation, and with the movement.[[11]](#endnote-11) Some in OO believe that the occupation of the Kaiser Center was planned to fail, so that there would be a clash with the police. It is hard to imagine that the police would not become aware of the target of such a widely publicized action. Furthermore if one wanted to successfully occupy a building, one would presumably send a small group to enter it quietly, without being noticed, before sending a thousand or more supporters.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Since the closure of most of the occupations around the country in the latter part of November, the Occupy movement as a whole has lost momentum. In both OWS and OO, as in other local Occupy movements that survived the closure of their encampments, organizing projects took on increased prominence. OWS now has neighborhood assemblies scattered through the city, some with several hundred regular participants, and with a range of foci; a neighborhood assembly in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, started by and consisting largely of Chinese and Latin American immigrants, addresses immigrant rights. Student organizing has also become an important focus for OWS activists. The State University of New York has announced sharp increases in student fees; Occupy activists, students and some faculty, have been mobilizing resistance. On 21 November an open hearing was held, the last before the imposition of the new fees; so many students and others came to the Baruch College building where the hearing was to be held, hoping to get into the hearing, that the administration closed the college down.

The most concrete, and perhaps the most successful, of OWS’s organizing efforts has been that in relation to housing. OWS activists keep tabs on a municipal list of forthcoming evictions, and the night before one is scheduled to take place, a message goes out on an anti-eviction phone tree. OWS activists gather at the location where the eviction is to take place and prevent marshals from entering. Some evictions have been prevented, at least temporarily, by this tactic. In order to stop foreclosures, OWS activists enter courts when foreclosed houses are to be auctioned and sing a song, ‘Mr. Auctioneer’, written, for this purpose, in the style of a gospel civil rights song, imploring the auctioneer to stop. This disrupts the sale; the speculators who are interested in buying protest but this usually leads to the sale being rescheduled by court officers, who are often sympathetic to the action. Typically the OWS activists are arrested, ticketed and released. OWS has a long list of projects in addition to these. OWS has also helped to inspire organizing projects that are not officially linked to OWS, such as efforts in Long Island, on the part of community activists working with local city councils, to establish community centres and other public projects.

Occupy Oakland is also engaged in a number of organizing projects. There have been efforts to stop the closure of a number of Oakland schools; a protest march drew perhaps 5,000 people. OO, like OWS, planned a number of May Day demonstrations; both hoped that May Day would show that Occupy was back, and in both cases, the results were uncertain. In Oakland a rally was held in Frank Ogawa/Oscar Grant Plaza, while an immigrant rights march set off from the barrio, which was to stop briefly at San Antonio Park, where it was to be met by an Occupy contingent; the plan was that the immigrant rights march would then continue on to join with Occupy. But there had been conflict about the question of whether a permit would be obtained. Many OO members are in principle against obtaining permits for marches and demonstrations. Immigrant rights activists, inside and outside OO, pointed out that many immigrants are unwilling to participate in illegal marches. In the end a permit was obtained. But when the immigrant rights march reached San Antonio Park, most of the immigrants left the march. Whether due to the conflict over a permit or for other reasons, it was clear that there was little enthusiasm for joining an OO march.

The most successful of OO’s organizing projects has been in relation to labour. The efforts of a number of OO activists were central to winning union endorsements of the General Strike; these endorsements were crucial to the massive mobilization that took place that day. The second port shutdown, on 12 December, highlighted OO’s willingness to mobilize its own membership in support of labour struggles. The OO labour support committee has also mobilized support for striking workers closer to home: a licorice factory in Union City with mostly Latino workers, several of whom had asked OO for support, and others. Currently OO members are working for solidarity between bus drivers and riders around the issue of fare hikes.

Neither the OWS nor the OO projects provide the foci for activist energy, momentum, or public visibility that was provided by the occupations. The Occupy movement as a whole faces the problem of any movement whose identity is tied to a tactic and an internal process rather than to a clearly defined goal: what to do when the tactic reaches its limits and the process loses its glow, when internal differences, or fatigue and declining numbers, call for more stable forms of organizing, a structure that does not presume unity, a clear goal or set of goals and a conception of how to reach them. OWS, OO and many other local Occupy movements have faced this problem since the closure of the encampments. OWS’s projects continue to involve considerable numbers of activists and its demonstrations, while nowhere near their earlier size, continue to draw significant numbers. OWS has maintained widespread public support. OO as well includes circles of committed activists pursuing promising organizing projects. But these are less visible to the public than OO’s recent demonstrations. To many who once enthusiastically participated in or supported OO, these demonstrations convey the impression that OO has become trapped in a no-win conflict with the Oakland police, and the eagerness to engage in clashes with the police appears juvenile. Some OO activists have suggested that the movement is reaching its end.[[13]](#endnote-13) My guess is that in New York and in Oakland, and no doubt elsewhere as well, the Occupy framework will recede while projects and networks of activists formed within it will continue to function. OWS leaves not only circles of activists engaged in projects but also a positive afterglow, a large periphery of former participants inspired by their experience and presumably looking forward to the re-emergence of mass protest. OO leaves a residue of former participants who have distanced themselves from the movement, many of whom no doubt feel a bit burned by their experience.

CONCLUSION

The gap between the wealth and power of those on the top, and everyone else, continues to widen. Sooner or later, probably sooner, there will be another upsurge of protest, and anarchism will undoubtedly play a major role in shaping its politics. The question is: what kind of anarchism? The anarchist vision of an egalitarian, decentralized society, with no state serving as central authority, leaves open the question of strategy.

There are many activists in OO, including anarchists, who are critical of the Insurrectionists. Nevertheless Insurrectionism and other closely related ultra-left currents are the most talked about versions of anarchism; confrontational tactics are hard to ignore. Insurrectionism has attracted considerable interest from among the newest generation of anarchists; older generations tend to be more sceptical. It is a tactic associated with ‘propaganda of the deed’, that is, with the promotion of spectacular challenges to authority on the part of small groups of militants, in the expectation that such actions will inspire others to rise up in revolt. Many anarchists and anti-authoritarian activists argue, however, that a politics that hinges on the super-militant actions of a few is implicitly hierarchical, or vanguardist, and not consonant with the principles of anarchism.

It is my impression that the influence of Insurrectionism among OO activists has less to do with Insurrectionist strategy than with the appeal of a highly confrontational politics. In the early days of OO several activists whom I spoke with described OO as the most radical occupation in the country. Asked what made OO the most radical, each of them said, ‘OO is against the police, against the state, and is unwilling to renounce violence’. They pointed out that police were not allowed into the encampment and that OO refused contact with any representatives of the state. Though for several months OO had substantial public support, and attracted many participants whom many would no doubt regard as mainstream liberals, OO’s core constituency consists of Bay Area radical activists and in particular Oakland’s anarchist-oriented, counter-cultural youth population.

I think that the appeal of a highly confrontational politics mostly has to do with the desperate situation of a generation of young people. In recent years Oakland has become a magnet for young people with a deep sense of alienation from mainstream culture and politics and, in many cases, an orientation toward anarchist politics. These circles are mostly white but more interracial than has in the past usually been the case among young anarchists. The economic crisis of 2008 and the austerity measures that have followed, including skyrocketing tuition and the scarcity of jobs, have hit young people hard, leaving many with few options and considerable scorn for the mainstream and also for anyone who hopes to bring about change through established channels. The frequently violent behavior of the Oakland police and frustration with the compromises and failures of Democratic politicians, on the local and national level, contribute to a politics built on impatience with the system. OO’s radical edge was a major element in its appeal, especially in its early months, when it managed to blend militancy with outreach and inclusiveness. But over time the outreach and inclusiveness were lost.

The question of violence is key to the prospect of building a mass movement for social change, and also of inspiring broad public support. Few people are willing to join a movement that is likely to expose them to violence; most people find nonviolence much more inspiring than scenes of violent conflict. Traditionally the term nonviolence has meant an absolute avoidance of violence against humans (and for many, other living creatures). Violence against property can be part of nonviolent politics, if it sends a message that is crucial to making a political point -- such as damaging a nuclear missile. Nonviolence has also meant establishing whatever communication is possible with one’s opponents and, toward that end, maintaining a bearing of dignity and restraint. Nonviolence is tied to prefigurative politics, the effort to exemplify the values that one hopes will hold sway in a better society. Nonviolence, in this sense, is not always possible or advisable. But tactics that are certain to lead to clashes with the police cannot be described as part of a nonviolent politics. Most Occupy movements understood that adhering to nonviolence is necessary to sustaining the movement itself and public support for it. But there is a failure to go beyond this and argue that provocative actions generally should be excluded from the repertoire of the left.

My concern with OO, and with the radical left in the US as a whole, is that it has been so long since we have been able to achieve any concrete goals that radical activism has ceased to be oriented in this direction. The aim of radical movements has come to be understood as resistance rather than social change. The two follow different logics. Resistance, measured by the intensity of opposition, calls for drama, performance, spectacle; change, measured by what opposition accomplishes, calls for thinking about how to get from where we are to the society that we want, or at least to one that is more livable and sustainable than the present. It seems to me that the latter question deserves more attention than it gets from the radical left.

1. NOTES

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   David Graeber, ‘Occupy Wall Street’s anarchist roots’, *Aljazeera*, 30 November 2011, available at http://www.aljazeera.com. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I owe this point to Mike Menser, one of the organizers of the planned anti-Wall Street protest in 2001, and an OWS activist. Interview, New York City, 10 May 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Interview with Marina Sitrin, New York, 7 May 2012. For an account of the first two months of Occupy Wall Street, see Writers for the 99%, *Occupying Wall Street: The Inside Story of an Action that Changed America*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Interview with Carwil Bjork-James, New York, 8 May 2012. See also Carwil Bjork-James, ‘Debating Tactics: Remember to Ask, “What Works?”’, available at http://www.jadaliyya.com. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Interview with Alex Vitale, New York, 9 May 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Interview with Matt Presto, New York, 9 May 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Many of the OO activists whom I interviewed were reluctant to be quoted by name due to concerns about security and/or the possibility that their comments might further inflame differences within the movement. I have therefore decided not to identify any of my OO interviewees by name. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Interview with Carwil Bjork-James, 8 May 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. An audio recording of this event is available at http://www.radioproject.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. In the weeks before 12 December, the question of whether OO should call for a shutdown, despite the opposition of the ILWU, was debated. See Cal Winslow, ‘Who’s Speaking for Whom? The Case of Occupy and the Longshoremen’s Union’, *Counterpunch*,5 December 2011, available at http://www.counterpunch.org; see also Oakland Commune, ‘Blockading the Port is Only the First of Many Last Resorts’, 7 December 2011, available at http://www.bayofrage.com. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This moment of disorientation and reflection was well represented online by both OO participants and observers. See, among others, ‘The Visible Committee and Insurrectionary Vanguardism: An Open Letter to the Broader Occupy Community Regarding Occupy Oakland From a Small Group of Oakland Radicals’, available at http://libcom.org; Marc Soloman, ‘Occupy Reality: How Oversocialization and Feelings of Inferiority Cripple Bay Area Occupations’, and Osha Neumann, ‘Occupy Oakland: Are We Being Childish?’, both in *Counterpunch*, 3-5 February 2012, available at http://www.counterpunch.org. See also ‘Santa Rita, I Hate Every Inch of You’, as well as ‘Building the Red Army: The Death and Forbidden Rebirth of the Oakland Commune’, both available at http://viewpointmag.com. Note that ‘The Visible Committee’ is a reference to a text widely read by Insurrectionists and others with similar views, by a group calling itself ‘The Invisible Committee’, *The Coming Insurrection*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009, originally published as *L’insurrection qui vient*, Paris: Editions La Fabrique, 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Josh Healy, ‘Occupy Oakland at a Crossroads: Rebirth or Self-Destruction?’, available at http://oaklandlocal.com. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See, for instance, ‘Occupy Oakland is Dead’, available at http://libcom.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)