



The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement

By David Graeber

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A bold rethinking of the most powerful political idea in the world—democracy—and the story of how radical democracy can yet transform America

Democracy has been the American religion since before the Revolution—from New England town halls to the multicultural democracy of Atlantic pirate ships. But can our current political system, one that seems responsive only to the wealthiest among us and leaves most Americans feeling disengaged, voiceless, and disenfranchised, really be called democratic? And if the tools of our democracy are not working to solve the rising crises we face, how can we—average citizens—make change happen?

David Graeber, one of the most influential scholars and activists of his generation, takes readers on a journey through the idea of democracy, provocatively reorienting our understanding of pivotal historical moments, and extracts their lessons for today—from the birth of Athenian democracy and the founding of the United States of America to the global revolutions of the twentieth century and the rise of a new generation of activists. Underlying it all is a bracing argument that in the face of increasingly concentrated wealth and power in this country, a reenergized, reconceived democracy—one based on consensus, equality, and broad participation—can yet provide us with the just, free, and fair society we want.

The Democracy Project tells the story of the resilience of the democratic spirit and the adaptability of the democratic idea. It offers a fresh take on vital history and an impassioned argument that radical democracy is, more than ever, our best hope.

Praise for David Graeber's *Debt*

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“Written in a brash, engaging style, the book is also a philosophical inquiry into

the nature of debt—where it came from and how it evolved.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

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“One of the year’s most influential books. Graeber situates the emergence of credit within the rise of class society, the destruction of societies based on ‘webs of mutual commitment’ and the constantly implied threat of physical violence that lies behind all social relations based on money.”—Paul Mason, *The Guardian*

“Part anthropological history and part provocative political argument, it’s a useful corrective to what passes for contemporary conversation about debt and the economy.”—Jesse Singal, *The Boston Globe*

“Terrific . . . In the best anthropological tradition, he helps us reset our everyday ideas by exploring history and other civilizations, then boomeranging back to render our own world strange, and more open to change.”—Raj Patel, *The Globe and Mail*

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Editorial Review

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About the Author

David Graeber teaches anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is the author of several books, including *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. He has written for *Harper's*, *The Nation*, and other magazines and journals.

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Graeber / THE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

ONE

The Beginning Is Near

In March 2011, Micah White, editor of the Canadian magazine *Adbusters*, asked me to write a column on the possibility of a revolutionary movement springing up in Europe or America. At the time, the best I could think to say is that when a true revolutionary movement does arise, everyone, the organizers included, is taken by surprise. I had recently had a long conversation with an Egyptian anarchist named Dina Makram-Ebeid to that effect, at the height of the uprising at Tahrir Square, which I used to open the column.

“The funny thing is,” my Egyptian friend told me, “you’ve been doing this so long, you kind of forget that you can win. All these years, we’ve been organizing marches, rallies. . . . And if only 45 people show up, you’re depressed. If you get 300, you’re happy. Then one day, you get 500,000. And you’re incredulous: on some level, you’d given up thinking that could even happen.”

Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt was one of the most repressive societies on earth—the entire apparatus of the state was organized around ensuring that what ended up happening could never happen. And yet it did.

So why not here?

To be honest, most activists I know go around feeling much like my Egyptian friend used to feel—we organize much of our lives around the possibility of something that we’re not sure we believe could ever really happen.

And then it did.

Of course in our case, it wasn’t the fall of a military dictatorship, but the outbreak of a mass movement based on direct democracy—an outcome, in its own way, just as long dreamed of by its organizers, just as long dreaded by those who held ultimate power in the country, and just as uncertain in its outcome as the overthrow of Mubarak had been.

The story of this movement has been told in countless outlets already, from the Occupy Wall Street Journal to the actual Wall Street Journal, with varying motives, points of view, casts of characters, and degrees of accuracy. In most, my own importance has been vastly overstated. My role was that of a bridge between camps. But my aim in this chapter is not so much to set the historical record straight; or, even, to write a history at all, but rather to give a sense of what living at the fulcrum of such a historical convergence can be like. Much of our political culture, even daily existence, makes us feel that such events are simply impossible (indeed, there is reason to believe that our political culture is designed to make us feel that way). The result has a chilling effect on the imagination. Even those who, like Dina or myself, organized much of our lives, and most of our fantasies and aspirations, around the possibility of such outbreaks of the imagination were startled when such an outbreak actually began to happen. Which is why it’s crucial to begin by underlining that transformative outbreaks of imagination have happened, they are happening, they surely will continue to happen again. The experience of those who live through such events is to find our horizons thrown open; to find ourselves wondering what else we assume cannot really happen actually can. Such events cause us to reconsider everything we thought we knew about the past. This is why those in power do their best to bottle them up, to treat these outbreaks of imagination as peculiar anomalies, rather than the kind of moments from which everything, including their own power, originally emerged. So telling the story of Occupy—even if from just one actor’s point of view—is important; it’s only in the light of the sense of possibility Occupy opened up that everything else I have to say makes sense.

When I wrote the piece for Adbusters—the editors gave it the title “Awaiting the Magic Spark”—I was living in London, teaching anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London, in my fourth year of exile from U.S. academia. I had been fairly deeply involved with the U.K. student movement that year, visiting many of the dozens of university occupations across the country that had formed to protest the Conservative government’s broadside assault on the British public education system, taking part in organizing and street actions. Adbusters specifically commissioned me to write a piece speculating on the possibility that the student movement might mark the beginning of a broad, Europe-wide, or even worldwide, rebellion.

I had long been a fan of Adbusters, but had only fairly recently become a contributor. I was more a street action person when I wasn't being a social theorist. Adbusters, on the other hand, was a magazine for "culture jammers": it was originally created by rebellious advertising workers who loathed their industry and so decided to join the other side, using their professional skills to subvert the corporate world they had been trained to promote. They were most famous for creating "subvertisements," anti-ads—for instance, "fashion" ads featuring bulimic models vomiting into toilets—with professional production values, and then trying to place them in mainstream publications or on network television—attempts that were inevitably refused. Of all radical magazines, Adbusters was easily the most beautiful, but many anarchists considered their stylish, ironic approach distinctly less than hard-core. I'd first started writing for them when Micah White contacted me back in 2008 to contribute a column. Over the summer of 2011, he had become interested in making me into something like a regular British correspondent.

Such plans were thrown askew when a year's leave took me back to America. I arrived that July, the summer of 2011, in my native New York, expecting to spend most of the summer touring and doing interviews for a recently released book on the history of debt. I also wanted to plug back into the New York activist scene, but with some hesitation, since I had the distinct impression that the scene was in something of a shambles. I'd first gotten heavily involved in activism in New York between 2000 and 2003, the heyday of the Global Justice Movement. That movement, which began with the Zapatista revolt in Mexico's Chiapas in 1994 and reached the United States with the mass actions that shut down the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle in 1999, was the last time any of my friends had a sense that some sort of global revolutionary movement might be taking shape. Those were heady days. In the wake of Seattle, it seemed every day there was something going on, a protest, an action, a Reclaim the Streets or activist subway party, and a thousand different planning meetings. But the ramifications of 9/11 hit us very hard, even if they took a few years to have their full effect. The level of arbitrary violence police were willing to employ against activists ratcheted up unimaginably; when a handful of unarmed students occupied the roof of the New School in a protest in 2009, for instance, the NYPD is said to have responded with four different antiterrorist squads, including commandos rappelling off helicopters armed with all sorts of peculiar sci-fi weaponry. And the scale of the antiwar and anti-Republican National Convention protests in New York ironically sapped some of the life out of the protest scene: anarchist-style "horizontal" groups, based on principles of direct democracy, had come to be largely displaced by vast top-down antiwar coalitions for whom political action was largely a matter of marching around with signs. Meanwhile the New York anarchist scene, which had been at the very core of the Global Justice Movement, wracked by endless personal squabbles, had been reduced largely to organizing an annual book fair.

The April 6 Movement

Even before I returned full-time for the summer, I began reengaging with the New York activist scene when I'd visited the city during my spring break in late April. My old friend Priya Reddy, a onetime tree sitter and veteran eco-activist, invited me to see two of the founders of the Egyptian April 6 Youth Movement who were going to be speaking at the Brecht Forum, a radical education center that often had free space for events.

This was exciting news, since April 6 had played a key role in the recent Egyptian revolution. It turns out the two Egyptians, who were in New York on a book tour, had a few hours unscheduled and decided they wanted to sneak off on their publicists and meet fellow activists. They'd called Marisa Holmes, an anarchist and radical filmmaker working on a documentary about the Egyptian revolution—she being the only New York activist, it seemed, whose phone number they actually knew. Marisa threw together the Brecht Forum event on a day's notice. Twenty of us ended up coming to sit around a big table in the Brecht Forum's library to listen to the two Egyptians. One, Ahmed Maher, young, bald, and rather quiet, mainly due to his uncertain

English, seemed to be the founder of the group. The other, Waleed Rashed, was large, florid, articulate, and funny—I pegged him more as a spokesman than a strategist. Together, they told stories about how many times they’d been arrested and all the little devices they’d used to outfox the secret police.

“We made a lot of use of cabdrivers. Without their knowledge. You see there is a tradition we have in Egypt: cabdrivers must talk. Continually. They cannot do otherwise. There is a story in fact that there was one businessman who took a cab on a long ride, and after half an hour grew bored of the driver’s endless prattling, and asked him to be quiet. The driver stopped the car and demanded that he leave. ‘How dare you? This is my cab! I have the right to talk continually!’ So one day, when we knew the police were going to break up our assembly, we announced on our Facebook pages that we would all be meeting in Tahrir Square at 3 p.m. Now, of course, we all knew we were being monitored. So that day, each of us made a point of taking a taxi around 9 a.m. and telling the driver, ‘You know, I hear there’s going to be a big assembly at Tahrir Square at two this afternoon.’ And sure enough, within hours, everyone in Cairo knew about it. We got a turnout of tens of thousands of people before the police showed up.”

April 6, it became apparent, was by no means a radical group. Rashed, for example, worked for a bank. By disposition, the two representatives of the movement were classic liberals, the sort of people who, had they been born in America, would have been defenders of Barack Obama. Yet here they were sneaking away from their minders to address a motley collection of anarchists and Marxists—who, they had come to realize, were their American counterparts.

“When they were firing tear gas canisters straight into the crowd, we looked at those tear gas canisters, and we noticed something,” Rashed told us. “Every one said, ‘Made in USA.’ So, we later found out, was the equipment used to torture us when we were arrested. You don’t forget something like that.”

After the formal talk, Maher and Rashed wanted to see the Hudson River, which was just across the highway, so six or seven of the more intrepid of us darted across the traffic of the West Side Highway and found a spot by a deserted pier. I used a flash drive I had on me to copy some videos Rashed wanted to give us, some Egyptian, some of them, curiously, produced by the Serbian student group Otpor!—which had played probably the most important role in organizing the mass protests and various forms of nonviolent resistance that had overthrown the regime of Slobodan Milosevic in late 2000. The Serbian group, he explained, had been one of the primary inspirations for April 6. The Egyptian group’s founders had not only corresponded with Otpor! veterans, many had even flown to Belgrade, in the organization’s early days, to attend seminars on techniques of nonviolent resistance. April 6 even adopted a version of Otpor!’s raised-fist logo.

“You do realize,” I said to him, “that Otpor! was originally set up by the CIA?”

He shrugged. Apparently the origin of the Serbian group was a matter of complete indifference to him.

But Otpor!’s origins were even more complicated than that. In fact, several of us hastened to explain, the tactics that Otpor! and many other of the groups in the vanguard of the “colored” revolutions of the aughts—from the old Soviet empire down to the Balkans—implemented, with help from the CIA, were the ones the CIA originally learned from studying the Global Justice Movement, including tactics executed by some of the people who were gathered on the Hudson River that very night.

It’s impossible for activists to really know what the other side is thinking. We can’t even really know exactly

who the other side is: who's monitoring us, who if anyone was coordinating international security efforts against us. But you can't help but speculate. And it was difficult not to notice that back around 1999, right around the time that a loose global network of antiauthoritarian collectives began mobilizing to shut down trade summits from Prague to Cancun using surprisingly effective techniques of decentralized direct democracy and nonviolent civil disobedience, certain elements in the U.S. security apparatus began not only studying the phenomenon, but trying to see if they could foster such movements themselves. This kind of turnabout was not unprecedented: in the 1980s the CIA had done something similar, using the fruits of 1960s and 1970s counterinsurgency research into how guerrilla armies worked to try to manufacture insurgencies like the Contras in Nicaragua. Something like that seemed to be happening again. Government money began pouring into international foundations promoting nonviolent tactics, and American trainers—some veterans of the antinuclear movement of the 1970s—were helping organize groups like Otpor! It's important not to overstate the effectiveness of such efforts. The CIA can't produce a movement out of nothing. Their efforts proved effective in Serbia and Georgia, but failed completely in Venezuela. But the real historical irony is that it was these techniques, pioneered by the Global Justice Movement, and successfully spread across the world by the CIA to American-aided groups, that in turn inspired movements that overthrew American client states. It's a sign of the power of democratic direct action tactics that once they were let loose into the world, they became uncontrollable.

US Uncut

For me, the most concrete thing that came out of that evening with the Egyptians was that I met Marisa. Five years before, she had been one of the student activists who'd made a brilliant—if ultimately short-lived—attempt to re-create the 1960s activist group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Most New York activists still referred to the key organizers as “those SDS kids”—but, while most of them were at this point trapped working fifty to sixty hours a week paying off their student loan debts, Marisa, who had been in an Ohio branch of SDS and only later moved to the city, was still very much active—indeed, she seemed to have a finger in almost everything worthwhile that was still happening in the New York activist scene. Marisa is one of those people one is almost guaranteed to underestimate: small, unassuming, with a tendency to fold herself into a ball and all but disappear in public events. But she is one of the most gifted activists I've ever met. As I was later to discover, she had an almost uncanny ability to instantly assess a situation and figure out what's happening, what's important, and what needs to be done.

As the little meeting along the Hudson broke up, Marisa told me about a meeting the next day at EarthMatters in the East Village for a new group she was working with called US Uncut—inspired, she explained, by the British coalition UK Uncut, which had been created to organize mass civil disobedience against the Tory government's austerity plans in 2010. They were mostly pretty liberal, she hastened to warn me, not many anarchists, but in a way that was what was so charming about the group: the New York chapter was made up of people of all sorts of different backgrounds—“real people, not activist types”—middle-aged housewives, postal workers. “But they're all really enthusiastic about the idea of doing direct action.”

The idea had a certain appeal. I'd never had a chance to work with UK Uncut when I was in London, but I had certainly run across them.

The tactical strategy of UK Uncut was simple and brilliant. One of the great scandals of the Conservative government's 2010 austerity package was that at the same time as they were trumpeting the need to triple student fees, close youth centers, and slash benefits to pensioners and people with disabilities to make up for what they described as a crippling budget shortfall, they exhibited absolutely no interest in collecting untold billions of pounds sterling of back taxes owed by some of their largest corporate campaign contributors—revenue that, if collected, would make most of those cuts completely unnecessary. UK

Uncut's way of dramatizing the issue was to say: fine, if you're going to close our schools and clinics because you don't want to take the money from banks like HSBC or companies like Vodafone, we're just going to conduct classes and give medical treatment in their lobbies. UK Uncut's most dramatic action had taken place on the 26th of March, only a few weeks before my return to New York, when, in the wake of a half-million-strong labor march in London to protest the cuts, about 250 activists had occupied the ultra-swanky department store Fortnum & Mason. Fortnum & Mason was mainly famous for selling the world's most expensive tea and biscuits; their business was booming despite the recession, but their owners had also somehow managed to avoid paying £40 million in taxes.

At the time, I was working with a different group, Arts Against Cuts, mainly made up of women artists, whose primary contribution on the day of the march was to provide hundreds of paint bombs to student activists geared up in black hoodies, balaclavas, and bandanas (in activist language, in "Black Bloc"). I had never actually seen a paint bomb before, and when some of my friends started opening up their backpacks I remember being impressed by how small they were. The paint bombs weren't actual bombs, just tiny water balloons of the same shape as and just slightly larger than an egg, half full of water, half of different colors of water-soluble paint. The nice thing was that one could throw them like baseballs at almost any target—an offending storefront, a passing Rolls or Lamborghini, a riot cop—and they would make an immediate and dramatic impression, splashing primary colors all over the place, but in such a way that we never ran the remotest danger of doing anyone any physical harm.

The plan that day was for the students and their allies to break off from the labor march at three o'clock in small groups and fan out through London's central shopping area, blockading intersections and decorating the marquees of notable tax evaders with paint bombs. After about an hour, we heard about the UK Uncut occupation of Fortnum & Mason and we trickled down to see if we could do anything to help. I arrived just as riot cops were sealing off the entryways and the last occupiers who didn't want to risk arrest were preparing to jump off the department store's vast marquee into the arms of surrounding protesters. The Black Bloc assembled, and after unleashing our few remaining balloons, we linked arms to hold off an advancing line of riot cops trying to clear the street so they could begin mass arrests. A few weeks later, in New York, my legs were still etched with welts and scrapes from being kicked in the shins on that occasion. (I remember thinking at the time that I now understood why ancient warriors wore greaves—if there are two opposing lines of shield-bearing warriors facing each other, the most obvious thing to do is to kick your opponent in the shins.)

As it turned out, US Uncut wasn't up to anything nearly that dramatic. The meeting, as I've mentioned, was held on the back porch of the famous vegetarian deli EarthMatters on the Lower East Side, where they sell herbal teas almost as expensive as Fortnum & Mason's, and, indeed, was populated by just as diverse and offbeat a crowd as Marisa had predicted. Their plan was to create an action similar to the one that UK Uncut had devised at Fortnum & Mason: to protest the closing of classrooms all over the city because of budget shortfalls, they were going to hold classes in the lobby of Bank of America, a financial behemoth that pays no taxes at all. Someone would play the role of a professor and give a lecture on corporate tax evasion in the lobby; Marisa would film the whole thing for a video they'd release on the Internet. The problem, they explained, was they were having some trouble finding someone to take on the part of the professor.

I had tickets to fly back to London that Sunday, so I wasn't exactly thrilled about the prospect of arrest, but this seemed a lot like fate. After a moment's hesitation, I volunteered.

As it turned out there wasn't much to worry about—US Uncut's idea of an "occupation" was to set up shop

in the bank lobby, take advantage of the initial confusion to begin the “teach-in,” and then leave as soon as the police began to threaten to start making arrests. I managed to scare up something that looked vaguely like a tweed jacket in the back of my closet, studied up on Bank of America’s tax history (one tidbit I put in the “cheat sheet” to be distributed at the event: “In 2009, Bank of America earned \$4.4 billion, paid no federal taxes whatsoever, but nonetheless got a tax credit of \$1.9 billion. It did, however, spend roughly \$4 million on lobbying, money that went directly to the politicians who wrote the tax codes that made this possible”),¹ and showed up for the action—which Marisa filmed for immediate streaming on the Internet. Our occupation lasted about fifteen minutes.

When I came back to New York in July, one of the first people I called was Marisa, and she plugged me back into another Uncut action, in Brooklyn. This time we ran away even quicker.

16 Beaver Street

Later that month, my friend Colleen Asper talked me into attending an event on July 31, hosted by the 16 Beaver Group.

16 Beaver is an art space named after their address just a block from the New York Stock Exchange. At the time, I knew it as the kind of place where artists who are also fans of Italian Autonomist theory hold seminars on CyberMarx, or radical Indian cinema, or the ongoing significance of Valerie Solanas’s SCUM Manifesto. Colleen had urged me to come down that Sunday if I wanted to get a sense of what was happening in New York. I’d agreed, then kind of half forgotten, since I was spending that morning with a British archaeologist friend passing through town for a conference, and we’d both become engrossed exploring midtown comic book emporia, trying to find appropriate presents for his kids. Around 12:30 I received a text message from Colleen:

C: You coming to this 16 Beaver thing?

D: Where is it again? I’ll go.

C: Now ? Till 5 though, so if you come later, there will still be talking

D: I’ll head down

C: Sweet!

D: Remind me what they’re even talking about

C: A little bit of everything.

The purpose of the meeting was to have presentations about various anti-austerity movements growing around the world—in Greece, Spain, and elsewhere—and to end with an open discussion about how to bring a similar movement here.

I arrived late. By the time I got there I’d already missed the discussion of Greece and Spain, but was surprised to see so many familiar faces in the room. The Greek talk had been given by an old friend, an artist named Georgia Sagri, and as I walked in an even older friend, Sabu Kohso, was in the middle of talk about antinuclear mobilizations in the wake of the Fukushima meltdown in Japan. The only discussion I caught all the way through was the very last talk, about New York, and it was very much an anticlimax. The presenter

was Doug Singsen, a soft-spoken art historian from Brooklyn College, who told the story of the New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts Coalition, which had sponsored a small sidewalk camp they called Bloombergville, named after Mayor Michael Bloomberg, opposite City Hall in lower Manhattan. In some ways it was a tale of frustration. The coalition had started out as a broad alliance of New York unions and community groups, with the express purpose of sponsoring civil disobedience against Bloomberg's draconian austerity budgets. This was unusual in itself: normally, union officials balk at the very mention of civil disobedience—or, at least, any civil disobedience that is not of the most completely scripted, prearranged sort (for instance, arranging with the police in advance when and how activists are to be arrested). This time unions like the United Federation of Teachers played an active role in planning the camp, inspired, in part, by the success of similar protest encampments in Cairo, Athens, and Barcelona—but then got cold feet and pulled out the moment the camp was actually set up. Nonetheless, forty or fifty dedicated activists, mostly socialists and anarchists, stuck it out for roughly four weeks, from mid-June to early July. With numbers that small, and no real media attention or political allies, acting in defiance of the law was out of the question, since everyone would just be arrested immediately and no one would ever know. But they had the advantage of an obscure regulation in New York law whereby it was not illegal to sleep on the sidewalk as a form of political protest, provided one left a lane open to traffic and didn't raise anything that could be described as a "structure" (such as a lean-to or tent). Of course, without tents, or any sort of structure, it was hard to describe the result as really being a "camp." The organizers had done their best to liaison with the police but they weren't in a particularly strong position to negotiate. They ended up being pushed farther and farther from City Hall before dispersing altogether.

The real reason the coalition fragmented so quickly, Singsen explained, was politics. The unions and most of the community groups were working with allies on the City Council, who were busy negotiating a compromise budget with the mayor. "It soon became apparent," he said, "that there were two positions. The moderates, who were willing to accept the need for some cuts, thinking it would place them in a better negotiating position to limit the damage, and the radicals—the Bloombergville camp—who rejected the need for any cuts at all." Once a deal seemed in sight, all support for civil disobedience, even in its mildest form, disappeared.

Three hours later, Sabu, Georgia, Colleen, a couple of the student organizers from Bloombergville, and I were nursing our beers a few blocks away and trying to hash out what we thought of all of this. It was a particular pleasure to see Georgia again. The last time we'd met it had been in Exarchia, a neighborhood in Athens full of squatted social centers, occupied parks, and anarchist cafés, where we'd spent a long night downing glasses of ouzo at street corner cafés while arguing about the radical implications of Plato's theory of agape, or universal love—conversations periodically interrupted by battalions of riot police who would march through the area all night long to make sure no one ever felt comfortable. Colleen explained this was typical of Exarchia. Occasionally, she told us, especially if a policeman had recently been injured in a clash with protesters, the police would choose one café, thrash everyone in sight, and destroy the cappuccino machines.

Back in New York, it wasn't long before the conversation turned to what it would take to startle the New York activist scene out of its doldrums.

"The main thing that stuck in my head about the talk about Bloombergville," I volunteered, "was when the speaker was saying that the moderates were willing to accept some cuts, and the radicals rejected cuts entirely. I was just following along nodding my head, and suddenly I realized: wait a minute! What is this guy saying here? How did we get to a point where the radical position is to keep things exactly the way they

are?”

The Uncut protests and the twenty-odd student occupations in England that year had fallen into the same trap. They were militant enough, sure: students had trashed Tory headquarters and ambushed members of the royal family. But they weren't radical. If anything the message was reactionary: stop the cuts! What, and go back to the lost paradise of 2009? Or even 1959, or 1979?

“And to be perfectly honest,” I added. “It feels a bit unsettling watching a bunch of anarchists in masks outside Topshop, lobbing paint bombs over a line of riot cops, shouting, ‘Pay your taxes!’?” (Of course, I had been one of those radicals with paint bombs.)

Was there some way to break out of the trap? Georgia was excited by a campaign she'd seen advertised in Adbusters called “Occupy Wall Street.” When Georgia described the ad to me, I was skeptical. It wouldn't be the first time someone had tried to shut down the Stock Exchange. There might have been one time they actually pulled it off back in the 1980s or 1990s. And in 2001, there were plans to put together a Wall Street action right after the IMF actions in Washington that fall. But then 9/11 happened, three blocks away from the proposed site of the action, and we had to drop our plans. My assumption was that doing anything anywhere near Ground Zero was going to be off-limits for decades—both practically and symbolically. And more than anything, I was unclear about what this call to occupy Wall Street hoped to accomplish.

No one was really sure. But what also caught Georgia's eye was another ad she'd seen online for what was being called a “General Assembly,” an organizing meeting to plan the Wall Street occupation, whatever it would turn out to be.

In Greece, she explained, that's how they had begun: by occupying Syntagma Square, a public plaza near parliament, and creating a genuine popular assembly, a new agora, based on direct democracy principles. Adbusters, she said, was pushing for some kind of symbolic action. They wanted tens of thousands of people to descend on Wall Street, pitch tents, and refuse to leave until the government agreed to one key demand. If there was going to be an assembly, it was going to be beforehand, to determine what exactly that demand was: that Obama establish a committee to reinstate Glass-Steagall (the Depression-era law that had once prevented commercial banks from engaging in market speculation) or a constitutional amendment abolishing corporate personhood, or something else.

Colleen pointed out that Adbusters was basically founded by marketing people and their strategy made perfect sense from a marketing perspective: get a catchy slogan, make sure it expresses precisely what you want, then keep hammering away at it. But, she added, is that kind of legibility always a virtue for a social movement? Often the power of a work of art is precisely the fact that you're not quite sure what it's trying to say. What's wrong with keeping the other side guessing? Especially if keeping things open-ended lets you provide a forum for a discontent that everyone feels, but haven't found a way to express yet.

Georgia agreed. Why not make the assembly the message in itself, as an open forum for people to talk about problems and propose solutions outside the framework of the existing system. Or to talk about how to create a completely new system altogether. The assembly could be a model that would spread until there was an assembly in every neighborhood in New York, on every block, in every workplace.

This had been the ultimate dream during the Global Justice Movement, too. At the time we called it “contaminationism.” Insofar as we were a revolutionary movement, as opposed to a mere solidarity movement supporting revolutionary movements overseas, our entire vision was based on a kind of faith that democracy was contagious. Or at least, the kind of leaderless direct democracy we had spent so much care

and effort on developing. The moment people were exposed to it, to watch a group of people actually listen to each other, and come to an intelligent decision, collectively, without having it in any sense imposed on them—let alone to watch a thousand people do it at one of the great Spokescouncils we held before major actions—it tended to change their perception over what was politically possible. Certainly it had had that effect on me.

Our expectation was that democratic practices would spread, and, inevitably, adapt themselves to the needs of local organizations: it never occurred to us that, say, a Puerto Rican nationalist group in New York and a vegan bicycle collective in San Francisco were going to do direct democracy in anything like the same way. To a large degree, that's what happened. We'd had enormous success transforming activist culture itself. After the Global Justice Movement, the old days of steering committees and the like were basically over. Pretty much everyone in the activist community had come around to the idea of prefigurative politics: the idea that the organizational form that an activist group takes should embody the kind of society we wish to create. The problem was breaking these ideas out of the activist ghetto and getting them in front of the wider public, people who weren't already involved in some sort of grassroots political campaign. The media were no help at all: you could go through a year's worth of media coverage and still not have the slightest idea that the movement was about promulgating direct democracy. So for contaminationism to work, we had to actually get people in the room. And that proved extraordinarily difficult.

Maybe, we concluded, this time it would be different. After all, this time it wasn't the Third World being hit by financial crises and devastating austerity plans. This time the crisis had come home.

We all promised to meet at the General Assembly.

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