Experiences of the Occupy Movement:

Systematic Oppression and the Importance of Communication

By Laura Ball
Introduction

Many people believe that the political system in place today called ‘democracy’ has not protected the rights and livelihoods of the majority of the people. Many believe, including those involved in the Occupy movement, that our current system allows for capitalist interests to undermine the rights of the majority for the benefit of a privileged minority, based along race, class, and gender lines. Many of the problems that inspire human beings to fight for their livelihoods are a direct result of the way in which the global capitalist system has been implemented. Different social movements have sprung up across the globe representing different issues, such as workers and farmer’s rights, environmental preservation, indigenous rights, among many others.

Many of these movements have been inclusive of many different marginalized peoples, who have different ideas of what issues need to be dealt with because of their personal experiences of suffering under the system. These differences can often cause tensions and frustrations, because everyone wants their own issue to be addressed. The Occupy movement is unique in that it addresses all these issues that are interrelated, making it all-inclusive to people of very diverse backgrounds. This is significant because it is a global movement for systematic change, addressing the way in which humans are living on this earth and the way in which we think. The abundance of issues that the Occupy movement has brought together makes communication between Occupiers and to its audiences imperative.

In my own life experiences, I have found that communication is the most important aspect of any kind of healthy, considerate relationship, whether it is between individuals or groups. Our own egos tell us that what we have to say is most important, which prevents us from actively listening to what others have to say. In a decision-making body, this often results in policies that do not represent the entire group, because every opinion is not taken into consideration. Many conflicts could have been easily prevented by learning how to listen and speak to one another. Still others have been rationally dealt with by having the presence of a mediator. The importance of communication has been demonstrated to me while spending time and interacting with individuals at Occupy Los Angeles, Occupy Wall Street, and Occupy Claremont, because through communication we can explore new foundations for organizing ourselves, and our resources. In this paper, I will be looking at the methods that Occupy movements are implementing to make decisions and resolve conflicts. I will look at non-hierarchical and horizontal movements and societies that have successfully implemented similar methods of communication, in order to provide examples that society at large can look to for alternatives to our current political, social and economic systems and switch our focus to local, small-scale organization.

Methods and Methodology

Positionality

Over the past few months, I have been participating in various Occupations. I first became involved in Occupy Los Angeles at City Hall. I stayed at the encampment about four or five days a week for over a month, participating in Committee meetings, marches and rallies, workshops, having informal conversations and gatherings with
different Occupiers, handing out fliers, and attending General Assemblies. I participated in musical gatherings, yoga and various kinds of meditation. I was surrounded by diverse kinds of people with unique points of view and backgrounds. I also participated in a group that would cook for Occupy Los Angeles, cooking 6 or 7 hours once a week to make enough food to serve almost the entire camp. I got to know the site and many of the Occupiers. I have already formed many relationships at the Occupation, and look forward to deepening those relationships and forming new ones. I felt that, when I was at the Occupation, I was immersed in the every day life of the Occupation, as a participant rather than an onlooker, while still attempting to maintain a critical awareness of what is occurring around me.

I hold a unique place in the Occupy movement, and a unique point of view. I have grown up in a strange time period, where racism is ever-present, though virtually invisible to those who are privileged enough to be unaffected by it. I was one of these people, completely unaware of what was going on around me, believing that the United States of America was “the land of the free” with equality reigning and racism being a thing of the past, resolved in the 1960s. That is how we are taught in school, the knowledge that those who are in control of what gets written in the history books want to impose on us. I was told that homeless people were there by choice, and that people are poor because they don’t work hard enough. However, as I separated myself from the bubble of suburban New York, I began to realize that this is not the case. It wasn’t until I began college that I really learned about the issues that cause these social problems, and how not only I, but all children in the American education system have been consistently lied to, in the hopes that we will become productive robot drones vomiting out profits like our genetically modified and chemically treated dinners. This infuriated me, and my compassion for others and the injustice they have suffered motivated me to get involved.

Staying at Occupy Los Angeles was not something that I felt I could just go to and stay a few hours a few times a week. I was marching, protesting, and having some of the most meaningful and real conversations and experiences that I felt I had ever had. I wanted to immerse myself in it and get a real understanding of the different people there—their stories and beliefs. I learned more in this setting about real problems than I ever could have from reading, because I was speaking to people every day that had lived these experiences.

I honestly think that staying at Occupy LA was the most influential experience in my entire life, but its also one that took a huge emotional toll on me. When people tell me about their suffering, I internalize these stories to the point where it feels like it happened to me. So when all these amazing, caring people were telling me how the banks took their homes, then they were sent to jail and their children were taken away and then they became addicted to hard drugs, as an example, and I was hearing so many of these stories every day and seeing the ways their lives have been impacted, I seemed to kind of absorb their sorrow and anguish, in a sense. This was all so heightened by the fact that before college and really, before this semester, I had never really interacted with people that had these kinds of problems before because I grew up so privileged and sheltered, and had no idea how bad things really are. The disbelief and learning all of this firsthand made me feel like my brain was filled to such capacity—it was all jumbled up and I couldn’t organize my thoughts on anything. But on the other hand, I had never felt so surrounded with love and unconditional care and support. So it kind of all came piling up at once, and experiencing all that, that was SO real, in the world rather than
sheltered in academia, where I have been for my entire life, made coming back to academia—being organized and writing papers, and being able to look at things in an analytical way—so extremely difficult for me. This information is not data for me, because I am not able to look at it as an outsider because I am not an outsider. I love these ideas and these people, and that makes talking about it in a traditional, Western, scientific and analytic way very difficult for me, and an internal struggle. However, I will do my best.

Methods

In my research, I have used the method of Critical Ethnography. I have interacted and been surrounded by many individuals within the movement, and attempt to consolidate my interpretation of some of these experiences in an attempt to analyze the modes of communication between Occupiers. I intend to reveal how individuals within the movement, many with diverse ideologies, interact with each other in cooperation and conflict.

To attain data for my project, I used the methods of interviewing, informal conversations, observation, participant observation, and social media. In the interviews, I asked individuals in the Occupy movement about their opinions on communication between members of the Occupy groups, and to the outside world. I did not explicitly stick to following my interview questions, but listened to what they had to say and butted in to ask about their opinions of various processes within the movement. I heard hints of personal stories of how these people have suffered from an oppressive system, what motivated them to join this movement, and what they want to change about the system in which we live. To the best of my ability, I will tell the stories I have been told as unaltered and pure, and in their own voice. However, I will mention some of the Occupiers that I have not interviewed, and describe my own experiences interacting with them and occurrences around the sites that I witnessed, though I will not disclose any information as to their identities. However I may believe at times that I am unbiased, this information will likely be revealed through the lens of the privilege that I have grown up with.

According to Habermas in his Critical Theory Model, social life is represented and analyzed for the political purpose of overcoming social oppression, particularly in forms that reflect advanced capitalism though the overt polemics of the researcher. These ideas will affect my research because social oppression is an aspect that affects the way in which humans interact. I will take an activist position by engaging in constantly evolving dialogue with members of Occupy LA and Occupy Claremont. I will be open to discussing and learning about people’s views of social change and practices, and analyzing those opinions, while keeping in mind that I am biased.

I believe that the standpoint I will use is the Feminist ideology. Feminists believe that there is no such thing as real objectivity, because the biases of the researcher will always be present. Postmodern feminist researchers view reality as a series of endless stories and ongoing texts that sustain the oppression of women. The Postmodern feminism standpoint believes that in oppressive contexts, one cannot produce more
than a partial story of someone’s life. In this manner, I will not attempt to convey that I have the full story, or the ultimate truth when I am writing my ethnography, however, spread awareness to the reader that what I am describing is only part of the story. They use approaches that foster conversation, critical reflection, and ultimately attempt to change an oppressive situation. The ultimate goal of my research project will be to encourage listening, reflection, and dialogue in the community, so that people may interact with each other in a way that provides an equal setting for all to voice their opinions and have the space they need to gain support to achieve their goals. I hope that this will lessen rising tensions in the movement between individuals working for a common cause, and provide a lesson for how cooperation and consensus can function in social movements.

Interviewees

Negesti
Negesti is an African American woman in her 20s that I met at Occupy Wall Street. She told me that she joined the movement for multiple reasons. She came on October 4th, a few weeks after the Occupation had started. At this point, she was working 10-hour jobs at work and had to choose between food and going to school. She was in passionate disbelief about the fact that, in the Constitution of the United States of America, African Americans are still considered ¾ of a “man.” She expressed her opinion that the Constitution should be considered null and void, because wealthy white landowners are no longer the majority of the country, and so to base our laws off of these values does not make sense. She does not support the Electoral College for this reason, and finds it atrocious that after paying taxes, she doesn’t get free healthcare, and gets no benefits. Congress votes against her interests, and she does not feel like she is a citizen of this country, although she is.. She said, “I shouldn’t have to choose between food and college,” and explained that she doesn’t feel that her vote counts. She couldn’t get financial aid, despite her need. She explained that a person of color has to work twice as hard as a white person in this country. Within Occupy Wall Street, she believes that some people are valuing their own personal interests above those of the group, explaining that people need to realize that the larger movement is more important than individual issues, and we have to realize that we are under heavy scrutiny from the public. She also expressed frustrations that the media is depicting the Occupy movement as ‘just a bunch of hippies and students who don’t know what they’re talking about,’ which is not the case.

Richard
Richard is an African American man originally from Los Angeles, who I met at Occupy Wall Street. He stated that he joined the Occupy movement because people were actually talking about critical issues with unique perspectives, instead of repeating what they had heard in the media.

Jacqueline
Jacqueline is a white college student from Arkansas who I interviewed at Occupy Wall Street. She couldn’t afford to pay for living on campus, so she was essentially homeless and sleeping at her school’s Occupation and already in substantial debt from attending an out of state institution for one year. In order to pay in-state tuition in Massachusetts,
her friend and her had to get married and fake a story to the financial aid office. She used to be in a Socialist Organization, but her experience at Zuccoti Park made her rethink her ideologies and become more open minded, rather than just trying to focus on one tactic.

Patrick is a white man in his 30s from Ohio, who also spends a significant deal of time in Claremont because he lived part of his life here. He did not finish formal education because he felt that life experience was more valuable, and did amazing things with it. He took part in the Mayan Revolution in the mountains of Guatemala, distributing medical care to people to control health in their own villages. Apparently, this created

Jeanette attended UCLA. She got her bachelors in Political Science and went into education for graduate school. However, now she believes that she can learn and have more of an impact on the streets, and is critical of academia for limiting teaching to the classroom, and not being accessible to everyone. She believes that what we struggle with in life is what we are supposed to do, and for her that is communicating and connecting with people. I witnessed her mediating a conflict, and she was really able to convey an understanding to the aggressor of his actions in a way that it seemed like he would honestly never react in that violent way again, which was inspiring.

Background: Problems-Inequality

Globalization, Capitalism

Globalization of resources and products has created a system in which workers in every country, developing and developed, suffer at the expense of powerful Western companies. These companies have been given almost limitless rights to carry out business, and cite “free-trade” as their excuse for destroying whatever it is they think they need to extract to make a profit, regardless of who has lived there for thousands of years, or who needs that land to grow food for their families in order to survive.

To these people, it would seem that the thrill and addiction of competition in the global marketplace and the importance of profit has outweighed any hint of compassion for the rights and lives of the people they are affecting. For the course of this country’s history, the same, small population of individuals has been allowed to thrive at the expense of the rest.

Injustice

Acknowledging and discussing the dominance of inequality in this country is not typical, but rather is hushed in mainstream society, where the trend seems to be to pretend that racism no longer exists and that our society is “color-blind.” Many use “politically correct” jargon to reinforce this claim. They still think and act the same ways, but just voice themselves in a more conservative way. This, in my opinion, has contributed to racism that is even worse than it ever was because it is hidden, and most
of broader mainstream society in this country does not realize that it still exists, and it is
not talked about. Many cite the fact that we have an African American president, and
had an African American woman as Secretary of State under George Bush, as examples
to support the notion that our country “is past racism.” The exceedingly high percentage
of African Americans that are unemployed, in prisons, and homeless, as compared to
whites is evidence that this is not the case. Additionally, the aggressive and brutal
treatment that African Americans, as well as other minorities such as Latinos have
always and still receive from law enforcement and the government is further evidence
that racism is far from gone.

The present immigration and detention policies of immigrants, legal and illegal,
from Latin America is further evidence of the reigning inequality in this country. Our
entire population, excluding the Native Americans, is made up of exceedingly diverse
pool of immigrants, the large majority of which came here in the last 150 years. If our
country is made up of immigrants, why do we now need to take such a tough stance to
immigration, specifically from Latin America?

Throughout history of the United States, citizens whose families came here as
immigrants who have become comfortable with their positions in society have fought to
keep other immigrants out. Not only do we try to keep immigrants out of the country,
but we instate policies in countries south of our border that create immense poverty and
danger, making it difficult to survive in those countries. Immigrants that cross the
border, according to Katherine from the group Samaritans in the Southern Arizona
Desert in the “800 Mile Wall,” do it because it is their last resort, as many of them know
“this is the last trip of their life.” They come because their families are starving in their
home countries. However, the media and politicians in the United States depict
immigrants as criminals, only here to rob the United States of our wealth and increase
unemployment by displacing white workers.

The jobs that immigrants are coming here to work are jobs that the average
American citizen will not do. There are now two walls along the border, where there
used to be one where families could go see each other through the gate. The gates are
tall, and have electrical barbed wire on top. According to Representative Steve King
from Iowa when speaking in support of building this fence, the electrical fencing to
prevent immigrants from climbing over the fence was justifiable because, “We do this
with livestock all the time,” as if that made this treatment appropriate and immigrants
do not deserve to be treated as human beings. Not only do we cause these immigrants to
put themselves in very dangerous situations to cross our border, but also we deny them
basic human rights when they arrive. Hateful attitudes towards immigrants, blaming
them for the loss of jobs when we should be looking to the government and corporations
that are sending our jobs overseas so that they can pay the workers so much less, are
racist and oppressive. This dialogue causes them, especially children, to internalize
inferiority and grow ashamed of their background and roots, causing them to deny and
reject their identity and culture.

Legal Injustice and The Police State

Corporate domination

Corporations are permitted to finance elections without limits, using the people’s
money to buy votes in their own interest. They have control over the local governments
and the police officers, through funding elections and donations to law enforcement agencies.

The NYPD, which has been shown beating and masing protestors in the Occupy Wall Street movement, received 4.6 million dollars in funding from JP Morgan Chase. According to a JP Morgan press release, this was “the largest donation in the history of the foundation” (JP Morgan Chase&Co, 2011). It would not be difficult to guess whom the NYPD’s allegiance is to, and whom they have to answer to.

The brutality and aggressive methods of law enforcement officials, taking orders from the city to remove the protestors, has also sparked attention to the violent and unlawful tactics implemented by many divisions for decades. During the Civil Rights movement, before, and since, police officers fired powerful, pressurized water hoses at African Americans and other protestors. Police officers have killed many African Americans without penalty, while African Americans, and other minorities throughout the course of our history, have traditionally been tried and killed for crimes that there was little to no evidence that proved them guilty. In September of this year, 2011, Troy Davis, a man charged with killing a police officer in Savannah, was lynched by the state of Georgia. The evidence for the murder was entirely witness testimony, and all but two of those witnesses have contradicted or recanted their testimonies, and have disclosed that they were pressured by police into testifying against Davis. One of the two that did not rescind their testimonies, Sylvester Cole, has significant evidence against himself as the gunman, and nine people signed affidavits claiming that he perpetrated the murder. However, despite essentially no evidence on Davis’s guilt, he was still unjustly murdered by the state (Amnesty International USA, 2011). Obviously, times haven’t really changed all that much.

Minorities have traditionally experienced the brunt of police brutality and it has gone largely unnoticed and undiscussed. However, because law enforcement have taken significant, brutal steps to squashing protestors dissent and voice in the Occupy movement, white people are experiencing it too, and outcry about this brutality has gained significantly more attention. At Occupy Oakland, police fired rubber bullets at an Iraqi war veteran, Scott Ohlsen, leaving him in critical condition in the hospital, with a fractured skull and unable to speak (cite-MSNBC).

According to Patrick, at Occupy LA, there was a man from Encino who had two houses. He lost them both and at the moment that he lost them he had to take his family somewhere else and he said they were divorced. He was put in jail, then the bank took his house, and his children were sent into foster-care.

Methods of the Movement

In “Political Theories of Decolonization,” published in 2011, Margaret Kohn and Kelly McBride analyze Hannah Arendt’s theories described in “On Revolution,” written in 1965, also during the civil rights movement. In this, Arendt notes that there is an important distinction to be made between liberation and freedom. According to her, the former is “the desire to live free from oppression,” while the latter is “the greater capacity for self-rule and engagement in politics.” She suggests that in America, the struggle for liberation revealed the path towards freedom for the participants, and it
creates the ability to achieve freedom. She applies this idea universally (Kohn and McBride 2011: 60). As she was writing at this time, it likely seemed that this revolution was going to be successful, and she did not foresee the problems that would occur in the future, and the acts that the government would take to limit the gains won by the movement. Kohn and McBride critique her theory in that it should not be applied universally, because the practice of freedom is often quite more difficult to attain, and is not solely brought about directly by solely engaging in the struggle. They also point out that revolutions do not possess preordained historical progressions, but that impulse for human action is needed to bring it about. Additionally, the course that revolution must take is not always known beforehand, because the situations and context in which they arise vary (Kohn and McBride 2011: 61).

Direct Democracy

The organized process or governing body of the Occupy movement is the General Assembly. The movement has no hierarchy and attempts to ensure that everyone’s voice is heard. The Facilitation group, open for anybody to attend, teaches individuals how to attempt to facilitate the General Assembly in a non-biased way. One person from this group will volunteer to facilitate the General Assembly, and this person changes every day. Anyone is welcome to take this position. In order to make an announcement or proposal during the Assembly, the Facilitation Committee (or “Working Group” so-called at Occupy Wall Street) keeps a list of individuals called “Stack,” and those on the list wait their turn to speak, or can raise their hands and be put on the list if they wish to speak. In Los Angeles, these people sit or stand in one area on the steps where the General Assembly is held until it is their turn. If people have responses or questions concerning specific proposals, they are counted and each person can do so after the proposal is made. After the matter is finished, Stack can then continue.

Also to avoid interruption, there are various hand signals used to indicate feelings concerning specific proposals or announcements during the General Assembly. These hand signals include agreement, disagreement, point of information or clarification, “process-” if someone is speaking out of process, and “hard-block,” meaning that you are so opposed to the proposal that if it passes, you will abandon the movement.

The Occupations started off using 100% consensus, but after experiencing issues with police and corporate infiltrators and provocateurs who would attend the General Assemblies, often to delay the decision-making process and spark conflicts, many Occupations agreed upon using 90% consensus. This method still ensures that essentially everybody is in agreement on the decision. According to an Occupier of Wall Street, “In our movement, its really important to have our means reflect the ends that we’re trying to create. We want to have more representation in our government and in our economy. So, in trying to create that, every decision has been made through our process of General Assemblies and through our process of working groups.” When there’s a decision that is given to you from a president, your investment in it usually relies on how much you profit from it. However, at Occupy, everybody works together to come to a decision. Because of the fact that these decisions are not reached in a top-down fashion, it can take much more time, but in the end the decision being voted on is stronger because it has been thoroughly discussed, to come up with the best thing that everyone can support together.
In “1491,” Charles C. Mann describes the conflict resolution process of the joint council of the Five Nations—the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Onondaga tribes. He describes the process of this council, called the Huadenosaunee, their social ideals of consensus, and the creation of their constitution. The council could also only deliberate on intertribal issues or relations with outside tribes, and could not declare war (Mann 2001(372). He explains the significant role of women in this process, as leaders of each of the 50 clans that made up the 5 tribes. They chose the “sachem,” or the man that would represent that tribe in the council, presented all issues that would be discussed, and had the power to demand that decisions be reconsidered. He also described the checks on its own power set up by the council. For example, in serious matters, the council would leave the ultimate decision to be made by the people (Mann 371).

Demands or not?

Much of the criticism of the Occupy movement by the mainstream media has been that it “has no demands,” seemingly in an attempt to delegitimize the movement. There are disagreements among Occupiers and non-Occupiers about whether or not we should make concrete, specific demands. While discussing the topic, some Occupiers asked, if we don’t make demands, “How will we free non-violent criminals from prisons, and end the torture?” Another asked, “How can we end the wars and end the abuses of American soldiers overseas?” How can we end the increasing privatization and profit-hungry nature of healthcare? One Occupier teaching a workshop at the People’s Collective University noted that Frederick Douglas, a former slave turned abolitionist revolutionary once said, “Power will exceed nothing without a demand.” Those that believe that we should make demands believe that we will not be able to accomplish anything concrete without doing so.

However, I believe that most Occupiers agree that we should not make specific demands, because, once met and a certain group of people are satisfied, it is very likely that people within the movement would be divided and estranged from each other. This would likely weaken the movement and perpetuate the divisions between people based on their differences. One man that I interviewed from Occupy Wall Street said that he did not agree with issuing demands because they would divide us when met.

In November, LA city officials issued an offer to Occupy Los Angeles, essentially bribing them to de-camp by offering a lease on a 10,000 square-foot office space for a low price, some farmland, and 100 beds for the homeless who joined the camp, for one year. Some would have taken these concessions, thinking that it was in their best interest as a lifestyle choice. So many of the homeless, for example, would have loved a warm bed to sleep in. However, the offer did not address the larger issues at hand that create homelessness, or even provide space for all the homeless in Los Angeles, but merely offered concessions to a few people, so that the city could have its extremely unsustainable green lawn back. These divisions likely also would have been along lines of race and class, because the divisions in economic status usually are. It would very likely have divided activists, those interested more in sustainability and healthy food, the homeless, and all the others in the camp that do not fit these criteria from each other by separating them and making meeting more difficult. The occupation of City Hall provided a central, public space for all these people to participate. This could have
weakened the movement by reinforcing differences and inequality rather than promoting collaboration and coexistence. 

Some Occupiers, including myself, believe that we should not make demands because doing so acknowledges that this government has power over us, and compromising with them would maintain this power structure. Most people within the movement agree that this system, this so-called “democracy,” which is not really a democracy because of the overbearing dominance of capitalism, is not working. Therefore, we seek systematic change rather than reform within the current system. Negesti told me that in order for this society to be viable 50 years from now, we need to be able to recognize that the world has to change and adapt, because this system is not working anymore. In her opinion the United States needs to stop focusing on being a world power and start focusing on its citizens, and the fact that there has been no amnesty for immigrants since Reagan is appalling. This new society needs to be a true reflection of the people that make this country run, such as the garbage men. Society needs to be able to adapt, in 200 years, it should reflect the people that make that society run. We need something different from the current system, but we should not put a definition on it because it will define itself as it happens and doing so would be limiting. As was written on a sign at the Occupy LA encampment and as Albert Einstein, one of the greatest geniuses of the 20th century once said, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them,” (“Albert Einstein Official Site. GreenLight LLC, 2011). 

Occupations-Spreading awareness and countering the mass media 

Despite the fact that we have not issued specific demands, we have already accomplished something great. The visual presence of a physical Occupation, often in central areas of the city, has accomplished one of the main goals of the movement-to spread awareness of the forces perpetuating injustice and oppression. The controversy that their physical presence and voice has initiated in these cities has created a local, national, and global dialogue about many deeply entrenched issues. It has sparked conversation between many people who might not have ever talked about these issues before, or even consciously avoided them. This can be seen in the many articles that have been published about the movement, that have raised issues of injustice and inequality. There are constantly articles about it in every major newspaper, regardless of whether they are biased or not. A lot of liberal news sources have had amazing coverage of it accessible mainly by the Internet, such as Aljazeera, Russia Today, and the Huffington Post. 

While at school, I participated in meetings of the Claremont General Assembly on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the Claremont Colleges, inviting students and community members to join us in event planning, spreading awareness and educating others concerning the injustice and oppressive forces that affect us and the world at large. We organized several teach-ins regarding political and economic forces that have lied to the people, including a screening and teach-in of “The Inside Job,” a documentary concerning how large banks predicted, did not prevent, and profited from the economic crisis, while still firing more workers and stuffing CEO bonuses. The teach-in that followed elaborated on many of these topics, and others. We began the Occupation of
Claremont City Hall, which has been widely supported by members of the community, save for the “Claremont Tax-Payers for Common-Sense,” which included 3 people in attendance at the City Council Meeting in regard to the Occupation.

I recently attended the Port Shutdown at the Port of Long beach, in an attempt to shutdown the ports to cause Goldman Sachs to lose profits for the day, and spread awareness about the abuses of rights of port workers-longshoremen and truck drivers. This action was in solidarity with all of the West Coast Occupations, along with others, that managed to shut down their ports successfully, while we only managed to for a few hours.

According to Patrick, a man I interviewed from Occupy Los Angeles, another way to communicate to the outside world about our principles is to “hit them in the heart.” He believes that creative methods such as flash-mobs, creating a spectacle, will emotionally appeal to viewers more than just straight facts. They would remember the performances and have time to really think about what it meant, and be able to better understand the issues that it was trying to convey.

Most of the mass media is not telling the whole story

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Additionally, a major method of communication with people watching as well as the other Movements has been the Social Media. Many people have said that within this movement, “the camera is our best weapon.” It has been used to show the world the brutality of police, the General Assemblies and live broadcasting of the daily routines of the Occupations. It has been an invaluable tool in spreading awareness of the movement, especially when much of the mass media does not seem to be on our side. For example, at the raid of Occupy Los Angeles, the news channel that I was watching a live broadcast from, KCAL, painted the raid to be entirely peaceful on the part of the police, and that the only ones getting even slightly violent were the Occupiers. Flipping through the channels, I found that all the news stations were saying the same things. However, upon discussing the raid with many friends who had been there, I discovered that it had rather been very violent, with 1400 cops, several beatings, and injuries caused by the firing of rubber bullets and beanbag guns, including a broken wrist. Additionally, the police kept many of the Occupiers on buses for 7 hours without water or access to a bathroom while still tied in plastic cuffs that were cutting off their circulation. Many were forced to pee themselves, and arrestees had to help each other pull down their pants to pee on the floor or in plastic bags, while officers laughed at them. The fact that the mass media did not mention any of this while they were filming the raid shows that they are also being controlled. According to Patrick and several other friends who were at the raid, the journalists were briefed at Dodger’s Stadium beforehand on what they could and could not film, and one journalist that apparently did not obey at the raid got violently handled by a police officer.

Decision Making

Affinity Groups
A form of communication to organize people with different interests and to promote negotiation between different perspectives is affinity groups. Within the larger movement, if small groups of individuals with similar interests organize themselves by forming affinity groups, these groups can communicate with each other more easily and a lot more can be accomplished. In “We Are Everywhere,” authors explain that members of these groups should have shared feelings, methods, and goals and that these should be discussed at the on-set. Affinity groups are presented as the “fundamental unit of direct action.” The authors write of its self-sufficient nature and its role within the larger movement, working to develop actions on its own or working with other affinity groups towards a common goal. They recall various social movements in which these groups were used successfully, including the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. They note that they have been used for a range of purposes, including as major decision-making bodies of mass-actions to providing services such as communications or health-care (Notes from Nowhere 2003: 88).

In cases in which movements are made up of individuals with many different ideologies, these groups are important for encouraging dialogue among them. In a movement like the Zapatista that has no leaders and is inclusive of drastically different kinds of people including “the indigenous farmers from the South and the post-industrial marginalized of the North,” (Notes from Nowhere 2003:80), methods to ensure that all voices are heard are important. In the case of the landless workers in Brazil, they recall, an affinity group has been used to ensure the security of the encampment, including keeping watch for security guards working for the companies that own the land they are occupying, which often use very violent tactics. However, the decisions made by these affinity groups that affect the entire group are proposed to the collective body (232).

The Occupy movement has been using these structures to organize people based on their interests and skills. At Occupy Los Angeles, there are Committees and Affinity groups. Committees are groups of people that organize around a specific purpose or topic for which a need is seen. The groups enforce horizontal organization, because anyone is allowed to participate at whatever level of commitment they are able to contribute, without official hierarchy. All the decisions made in these Committees are also made by consensus. At Occupy Wall Street, there are Working groups that meet at the Spoke’s Council to discuss their activity and make decisions.

Movements should be careful to remain inclusive and non-discriminatory when using these groups. Negesti, an African American woman in her 20’s occupying Zuccoti Park at Occupy Wall Street, thinks that the Spoke’s Council mirrors the same system that we are trying to work against. This Council is a meeting in which only members of working groups, which are essentially affinity groups, can meet and speak there. Apparently the working groups are intense commitments, and she does not feel that she should have to choose one issue to devote all of her time to because she is passionate about many. Additionally, she has a job, and the meeting times for these groups are not always convenient for those with other commitments. She believes that this exclusivity is discriminatory against people who are still employed and have other commitments. She also claimed that the Council discusses and filters what gets said at the General Assembly.

On the days when Spoke’s Council meets, three times per week, the General Assembly does not meet. This, Negesti says, limits accessibility for people who come to
try to attend the General Assemblies but find that it is not there, are unaware of the meeting place of the Spoke’s Council, and would still be unable to go and contribute. Additionally, she claims that the Council to some extent discusses and filters what gets proposed at the General Assembly.

This is not a good policy, in my opinion, because it alienates people who do not have schedules that are flexible enough to be able to accommodate every working group meeting. By excluding people who are searching for the General Assembly when it is not meeting, it limits the voices that can be heard and may cause the people who were genuinely hoping to be able to listen and contribute to feel disheartened, frustrated, and even angered. I believe that if the Spoke’s Council should continue, it should be before the General Assemblies rather than replacing them, and the meeting times and place should be made very clear to anyone who wants to be involved, by social media and by announcements and explanations at Zuccoti Park before the time of the meeting. Additionally, I think that the meetings should be changed so that all of the working groups present what they have been doing in a way that even newcomers to the movement can understand, and illicit any kind of input from the attendees, regardless of their involvement.

General Assembly

Negesti also discussed the functionality of the General Assembly, and her frustrations that the Facilitators often talk over people who use the “mic-check,” or begin to claim the People’s microphone to be heard in the middle of the Assembly, when they are trying to make a point or voice their opinion. She believes that at these Assemblies, people need to acknowledge each other more and listen to each other, even if those people are speaking “out of process.” She believes that these people’s opinions at least need to be acknowledged, explaining that people would not be speaking out of turn if they did not have something important to say. She thinks that the “point of process” needs to be addressed, allowing time for people who have things to say before Stack. This is a valid point, because it may be the case that the issue they are addressing when speaking out of process is in reaction to something that had just been said in the Assembly, and that discussion needs to be had at that particular time when the topic is still relevant. However, she believes that the GA is a good model for how things should really work in society, which makes it even more important to address its flaws, to show that the movement is open to adapting and changing.

Jacqueline believes that the decision-making bodies have been testing people to focus on important things and rely on each other. The working groups and the General Assembly are trying to get people to question the model of government based just on efficiency. However, in her opinion, there are problems with how Wall Street Occupiers are working together, however, the model is very new. The sense of collectivity that has been created within the movement has prevented some people from speaking up for themselves. As many people have said, “We are not a leaderless movement, but a movement of leaders.” People need to find their power within collectivity to speak out. In attempting to represent everyone and trying to cooperate, people may be divided. However, she says, clashes represent the issues that we need to deal with and fix in our broader society.
What I have seen at both Occupy Los Angeles and Occupy Wall Street is that a small group of people is trying to take power and make their voices louder than everybody else’s. This is a major concern with the movement, because, unfortunately, it has become increasingly clear that white males are beginning to take power for themselves, and, whether consciously or unconsciously, may not be listening to others in the group as much as they should be. Many have not really experienced discrimination and hardship on the same level as non-white males or females, but have rather experienced a great deal of racial and gender privilege throughout their lives, just recently finding themselves without jobs or homes. Due to the fact that they have always been among the most privileged members of society and have traditionally and historically been in positions of power over those of different race, class, and gender, social life has conditioned them to believe that they are better equipped to assume these roles. The presence of this issue makes the use of the consensus system and the fact that the principles of the movement are based on horizontalism as a non-hierarchical movement, even more important, so that the decisions made represent everyone involved.

*Formal education is a privilege, not an indicator of intelligence*

A contributing factor to this unconscious belief and assumption of power may be the fact that many of these people have been through academia, attending university and even graduate school, and therefore believe that they have more to contribute to the group because they have gone through the formal education system. Jeannette explained her belief that many of the people that have not been through academia may be intimidated with the kind of jargon and style of speech used by many of those who have, and may not feel that they are able to articulate themselves, and therefore some do not try. For this reason, Jeanette worked with Mediators Beyond Borders to set up articulation workshops.

Additionally, she believes that it is very possible that the people that have been through academia do not actively listen to others who have a different style of speech that society has told us is unintelligent. This causes many people who are used to a certain style of speech to fail to consider what others are saying to be worthwhile, because they are used to being told that one must voice themselves in an articulate manner to be intelligent and have valid points. Therefore what they have to say may be considered insignificant by some, or not taken as seriously as it would be if it were proposed by someone who speaks like a white person. I witnessed this demonstrated a few times during Occupy. Once, specifically, a Latina woman went up to the General Assembly and made a proposal to set up a formal education system.

However, having access to a formal education does not dictate intelligence, but is a sign of privilege, and a large aspect of the movement to change society is to eliminate discrepancies in this privilege. Part of doing this is recognizing that there is more than one kind of intelligence, and that people who have not had formal education and have lived these injustices throughout their lives need to be empowered to voice themselves. In order to do this, they need to be given the space to be heard and listened to. Any preconceptions of their intelligence need to be recognized and dealt with so that they can be eliminated. Additionally, if the people assuming roles of leadership do not have substantial life experience with discrimination, injustice, and hardship, they should not
believe that are more equipped to solve all of society’s problems than anybody else, and should constantly be working together with those who do have this experience, as equals.

Jeanette touched upon this in discussing academia. We both agreed that we had learned so much more from merely living at the encampment of Occupy Los Angeles, surrounded by the problems that we had studied at school, than we could have from our readings. The fact that our neighbors were people who had suffered these diverse injustices created a much more tangible and real world picture of these problems. This kind of life experience can create a much clearer picture of what the problems are and what needs to be done, and makes including these people very important. We need to work alongside the people who really know what it is like, rather than use abstract brainstorming to make decisions, without the input of these people. Many people who have suffered these injustices show the scars to prove it, including drug abuse and mental illness, which has caused conflicts, arguments, and even some violence within the movement. However, the conditions that these people

For these reasons, the movement needs to remember to be inclusive of these people, and encourage them to speak up rather than ostracizing groups of people within the movement based on these differences that the injustices of the system have created. In social movements, these differences need to be acknowledged, discussed, and embraced if every voice is to be heard.

Acknowledging our Differences

In “Roots for Radicals,” Edward T. Chambers explains the ideologies of Saul Alinsky, who was an organizer and the leader of the Industrial Areas Foundation in the 1940s. He attempted to provide people of many races the resources they needed to shape decisions for their own lives and communities, when they had little rights and were suffering in the city slums and industrial jobs. Chambers describes Alinsky’s ideologies that change within a movement cannot occur without first acknowledging the differences between the participants, and how the power dynamics maintained by the status quo have affected them. Chambers explains Alinsky’s law of change by stating that “there is no change without the movement of action, no movement without the friction of competing interests, and no friction without the heat of controversy” (Chambers 2003) 31).

In “Methodology of the Oppressed” published in the year 2000, Chela Sandoval supports Foucault’s views of an ideological shift that can cause revolution to be successful in undoing fascism (Sandoval 2000: 164). She describes the time period in which Foucault wrote at the height of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, in which people of many different races and backgrounds were organizing to fight for a common goal. She describes his beliefs that de-individualization can generate love, desire, and resistance. She discusses the need to change our discourse from negative to positive language, to encourage differences from traditional western knowledge, and believe that a nomadic lifestyle is productive. She reinforces his claims that we do not have to be sad in order to be militant, and that our revolutionary force can be found by connecting our desires to reality. She explains that we should use political practice to intensify thought and analysis to strengthen political action. She reiterates his claims that the group
should work to deconstruct culturally embedded social hierarchies of individuals, to work as a group of equals (Sandoval 165). Her reinforcement of his ideologies demonstrates that Foucault’s theories have been central to the ideologies of activists organizing communities for social change and have created strong leaders.

In social movements, differences need to be acknowledged, discussed, and embraced if every voice is to be heard. An African American man that I interviewed at Occupy Wall Street believes that people need to openly address the issues that divide us. He told me that he joined the movement because, when he visited, he heard people discussing real issues, with diverse and insightful perspectives, and that there was a sense of freedom from race-class social structures while people exchanged ideas of justice, equality, and freedom. However, he was concerned that individuals within the movement need to receive each other with an open mind and heart, to listen to views that do not agree with our own. He also believes that individuals within the movement need to stop avoiding the issues that make us uncomfortable, and that also keep us away from each other, such as racism, sexism, and classism. These issues are not going to go away if we avoid them but create conflicts, so, he said, “We need to break it down and deal with it and provide a model for outside society, because no one wants to recognize that it exists.” Being from Los Angeles, he explained, it was obvious that the City was trying to divide people based on race and class. The way we grew up and our privilege dictates our point of view, and, in agreement, I think that the best way that we can combat this attempt by governments to divide us, is to discuss our differences and the oppressive forces that accentuated them so that we can be on the same page and resist this force. We need to embrace diversity and accept each other to be able to heal the hatred and tensions that these divisions have caused.

Localization: An Alternative Society

Industrialization and loss of community

As the Western world became industrialized, the people who integrated into this system of mass-factory production gradually stopped relying on each other within the community for resources. They moved from their small villages in the country to the cities, and integrated into this system that paid them small, constant wages for creating something that would be shipped somewhere else. The focus turned to the work that they did for the company, rather than what they contributed to the community. As I see it, this significantly contributed to a shift from the values of the small, local community and turned the focus to cities that were the hubs of commerce.

Focus on the nuclear family, not the well being of the community

In the cities, individuals began to depend almost entirely on themselves and their close relatives for support and less on the people living around them. This division resulting from the push to be successful that has been championed as individualism and “every man for himself” in the business world has divided us into our nuclear families. Adults feel responsible for spouses and children, but not for friends and the surrounding community, or even their own more distant relatives who do not typically live in the
same neighborhood. This shift has caused many people to not provide for each other outside of the familial sphere of direct relation. Even where small communities do exist, in the suburbs, most adults commute to work in the cities, diverting attention away from providing for the community, but only providing for one's own family.

Diffusing of Community Relationships

This shift in Western society away from small, close-knit communities to large cities caused people to become isolated from each other. In the cities, they would live in small apartments or tenements with their close relatives, in a large city surrounded by unfamiliar faces. Results of “Community Lost or Transformed? Urbanization and Social Ties,” a study conducted at the University of Washington, found that “urbanization especially encourages the segmentation of social ties by discouraging interconnectedness” (White 2003: 256). Instead of being connected to each other through mutual cooperation in the community, the study found that the types of relationships now common in cities are ‘weak ties,’ linking people based on different social roles needed for political and economic personal progress in the job world. The study found that villages further away from metropolitan centers lead more connected social lives then those close to metropolitan centers (White 2003: 256), proving that livelihood relying on the cities detracts from forming and maintaining close relationships in the community. Ensuring the well being of community members is not commonly thought of as a responsibility, because community as it used to exist is very rare now, along with the quasi-familial connectedness between locals that went with it.

Disappearance of Local Business due to Globalization

Those that still live in small villages such as suburbs attempting to earn a living are separated from their communities because they generally have to commute to work. In the Inland Empire, for example, about 400,000 commuters who can afford a motor vehicle, travel to work in neighboring counties on the highways alone each day. This does not include the number of commuters that use alternative forms of transportation (Illich 1974). The fact that they are spending less time in the community takes their money away from local businesses run by their neighbors, who would support each other in a local economic system, and instead typically gives money back to large superstores like Wal-Mart that are conveniently located on their mechanical route to and from work.

These non-local businesses run by corporations sell cheaper goods, made by workers in far off lands, and takes away all connection we ever had to who made the products we buy, what they were made with, and where the materials they were made with came from, causing us to value what we buy less and more readily throw it away, wasting more. These products that we want ‘more’ of need to be imported from Asia, made with parts from Africa and other distant places around the world. Every notion that we once had of local products made by local businesses and bought by locals has been destroyed. We have grown completely disconnected from the products that we buy, because they magically appear in the super-store chain that is a convenient drive away, because these chains have taken over local businesses and are in essentially every town. Instead of going to the local clothing store, we shop at super-stores that export jobs.
overseas so that they can exploit the labor of developing countries by paying often unlivable wages in unhealthy, dangerous factory conditions.

We have been fed a single version of ‘success’

The emphasis on personal property has been a romanticized ideal since the United States began to be colonized. This country was born on the romanticized ideal of owning land and personal property. This ideal has created a singular idea of what success means. If one makes enough money to own a house and many personal belongings, they can be considered successful. A friend of mine deeply involved in the Occupy movement explains this not as ‘individualism,’ but rather, “enlightened selfishness.” As he explained it, individualism includes the ability to make decisions for oneself despite what path the greater order tells you to take. Enlightened Selfishness includes the greed of constantly wanting more personal possessions, along with the ever-present idea that part of being ‘successful’ in this society means having enough money to financially provide for a family to create a legacy in your name after your own lifetime. In order to be considered honorable and successful, adults are expected to slave away at tiresome, robotic jobs within the capitalist system, working long and sometimes dangerous hours to make enough money for their family to be ‘comfortable,’ and to give their children enough money to have the opportunity and privilege to be successful in the same way.

Consumer Society

‘Comfortable’ in the Western idea of it means having enough money to buy things that they don’t really need. Children today think that they need iPods, video games and big screen televisions with cable so that they can watch people act ridiculously and violently, because the media makes people think that having these things will make you happy, and that having enough money to buy these things, makes you ‘cool.’ Now many parents spend money on these things, even if they don’t really have enough money to spare, because these are the toys that their children want. Children used to spend more time being active and playing outside, but now spend much of their lives watching screens. Since the 50s, the increase in this type of media brainwashing has strengthened the consumerist society, telling us that we need ‘more, more, more!’ to be happy. Sitting in the airport in Phoenix, Arizona, I became wary of the commercials that were being broadcasted to the terminal. “More, it’s my favorite word” excitedly to explain why this woman shops at Target. I have a question, if “traditional American values” are religious, as exceedingly wealthy Conservative politicians like Rick Perry and Michelle Bachman so claim to be when they take a stance against gay marriage and abortion, have they forgotten that gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins?

This global capitalist system is not working for the majority of the people in the world, who are suffering and struggling to make ends-meet. It is only working for the power and profit-hungry elite, who seem to have lost sight of the importance of the well being of the people, due in part to their own greed. Einstein also said, “The value of a man should be seen in what he gives and not in what he is able to receive” (cite). In my
interpretation, this means that the person who solely takes or takes more than they give should not be revered and held in a position of power, for that is nothing to respect.

Need for a Change

With all of the global conflicts, abuses of power, unemployment, homelessness, and violence occurring worldwide, it is clear that there needs to be drastic change. People aren’t taking each other into consideration when making decisions, which ends up hurting everybody, including those making the decisions, though they may not realize it yet. These people who make decisions to benefit themselves at the expense of others are not taking anyone into consideration, including themselves, because I personally doubt that they are achieving happiness and personal fulfillment by doing so. Elisee Reclus, a French anarchist, wrote that people experience the highest personal gratification by working for the general good. He writes that every individual should act by always considering the welfare of all. He describes voluntary communism, which respects individuality, while being based on solidarity, something that I think the Occupy movement is attempting to emulate. He stresses the need for gradual change through the spread of knowledge. He wrote that, “The first of the laws of history is that society models itself upon its ideal.” The ideals that he claimed have to be realized are “bread for the body (food), bread for the mind (education), and bread for the spirit (brotherhood)” (Marshall 1992) 344). This is significant because if his claim that society models itself upon its ideal is true, then if we manage to change the way people think, we can change society.

Change in Consciousness

Many people, not only within the Occupy movement, are talking about a shift in consciousness that many believe is what is going to occur in 2012, as predicted by the Mayan calendar. In fact, many believe that it is already beginning, and that the rise of global movements and Occupations in recent months are signs of this change. Many think that people are starting to realize that the world has developed and is currently functioning at a rate that is not sustainable, with all the waste and injustice that has been a result of global capitalism. The fact is that this system has only been around for a few hundred years, and though many think it is impossible, change is always possible. History is clearly not over, and, therefore, the possibility for this change to occur is great. Obviously, it will take a long time, but many are starting to think about what it will look like. Jeanette told me that one Native American man told her that this change would be a change in thinking and being, and people would gradually realize and become planetary citizens. To her, part of this change means that we need to stop hiding within ourselves, but that “We have to be present where we’re at and that’s with the community and with our people, and all of life, which includes the trees and the grass and all of life in the ocean and beyond.”

How we can personally affect a change in the way people think

There were many people within the Occupy encampment who lived the change that they hoped to see by living their lives freely without constraints put upon them by the system, and sharing everything that they had, unwary of personal possessions. Many
within the movement complained about them because they didn’t involve themselves in the political affairs within the camp, however, I believe that both kinds of people are necessary in this movement-the people who try to actively affect the change, and the people who live their lives the way that they want to lead them. However, Jeanette was of the opinion that this change can come about by leading by example and mentoring people. Therefore, these people who live freely and love and travel are beautiful and necessary within the movement, but they need mentor others and spread awareness that this kind of life is possible and can lead to peace and happiness. Some of these people did do this, they showed me how to relax and be at peace with the world, however, there needs to be a balance between this type of meditative spirituality and reaching out to others who are not as fortunate to have the ability to do this due to their hardships, or to have discovered such a state of being. Jeanette believed that mentoring and being a role model is how she could affect change, and by leading by example. We can disregard what the media tells us, and believe that if we are happy in life and have made an impact, then we have been successful.

Providing for Each other

Sharing when we have more than we really need, even when close friends are experiencing times of need, is not a dominant cultural value in this society but rather referred to as “charity” or dismissed as “communism.” The alternative that seems to be preferred within our society is taking as much as we can for ourselves. However, she believes that by helping and reaching out to people in any way we can with the resources that we have, showing people that by being compassionate and being concerned for the well-being of others in our communities, we can build relationships, sustain a community and bring happiness, we can inspire others who are watching us to choose that path for themselves. Not only can we show this to people on the outside who are watching, but I have already seen this change have an impact on people that joined the Occupy Los Angeles encampment who had been constantly harassed on the streets by police, and joined Occupy because it was being allowed to stay there. Although there were many issues with some homeless people, gang members, among others stealing things, many homeless people that stayed at the camp began to catch on to the community mindset that reassured them that they were supported, that we were all equals sharing with each other, and stopped stealing because everything they needed, including people to value them, was provided.

Although this kind of sharing is not an ideal of mainstream society, it is more common than people think, proving that it is indeed possible. According to Alperovitz in America Beyond Capitalism, cooperatives are very popular in the United States. There are 48,000 co-ops operating within the country, about 10,000 credit-unions, about 36 million Americans purchase their electricity from rural cooperatives, and about 30% of farm products are marketed through community cooperatives (Alperovitz 2011).

An Alternative Society

The rationale of the way of living and thinking that Western society patriots and perpetuates around the globe gains power from physical and relational separation of
individuals from each other. These separations that occur when people leave their communities weakens the voice of the people by dividing them, making them think that they have nothing in common, instead of feeling empowered to be part of a close-knit community in which the people support each other. The focus on success and the necessity to leave the community in order to make ends meet decreases our quality of life, by taking us away from our family and friends. What is life if we are not spending it with the people we love? However, we need to realize that we have the potential to change. We have the power to improve our livelihoods, to have communities regulate themselves on a non-hierarchical basis, and to prevent being taken over by imperialist companies. This model has been demonstrated in many communities and tribes.

Writing “Egalitarian Societies,” in 1982, James Woodburn elaborates on two contemporary nomadic, hunter-gatherer societies, the !Kung and the Hadza. He explains that the social construct of property is not tradition in these societies, and that all individuals have direct access to resources. However, once they have met their own requirements with resources they have acquired, goods are immediately shared with the community. He explains that lack of dependence on specific individuals prevents authority in terms of group and domestic authority because no one person controls the resources. Neither parenting nor general seniority provide grounds for a relationship of authority or dependency, simultaneously training youth in sharing and self-reliance. Individuals of either sex and of any age are given access to resources needed to obtain their requirements, and are autonomous.

Obviously, because we, as a society, have developed so far in terms of technology and science and the infrastructure of cities, we would most likely not be able to live this exact lifestyle very soon, however, if these ideals were implemented gradually within our system, we could be able to work towards living as equals, being able to provide for each other and have enough for ourselves and our families. He also discusses the importance of the freedom of individual mobility to travel among different territories and tribal groups, which limits the possibility of a few gaining control, and provides access to resources over a larger area so they are not quickly depleted. If, in the future, we were able to revitalize our natural habitats, this could become a reality, however, I believe that it might be shown more in the form of communities growing their own food and rotating the land. He deduces that these factors limit ‘unacceptable discrepancies’ in wealth and the standard of living between different groups (Woodburn 1982: 438).

According to Daniel Quinn in “Beyond Civilization,” many people accustomed to Western thought and governing structures often deny that tribalism can be a successful organization of societies. He points out that any suggestion that tribalism was successful is often perceived as a threat to the State that does not want its subjects to believe that we can organize ourselves (Quinn 1999: 12). In fact, the State is currently seeing that we can organize ourselves, and it is scared. That is why they are reacting against us with violence, trying to deplete our morale to prevent the movement from being successful.

However, he describes the success of tribes across the globe, and throughout history, where they have managed to remain unscathed by Western ideas of what civilization should be. He describes ‘civilization’ as massive societies in which individuals are disconnected from each other, as is the case today, and ranked so that the few in power can justify and normalize their positions of power. This book comes at a time when many are starting to question the way in which our society functions to divide people based on differences in the labels that society has given us, creating a
constant environment of competition and resentment. He expresses hope, however, that many groups of individuals are exploring new ways of interacting with each other based of compassion and brotherhood. He presents the idea that in moving beyond ‘civilization,’ upheaval of the current system is not necessary because we do not desire to overthrow the hierarchy, but rather to leave it behind and start something new. “Hierarchy,” he explains, “does not know how to defend against abandonment” (95). I agree that we do not need to bring down the current system, but create our own system, because if we try to topple the system, there will undoubtedly be war and bloodshed. The Occupy movement is trying to do exactly this-create its own system, though Quinn must have underestimated the governing forces of the United States, because even without violently trying to topple the system, the Occupy movement is being targeted with violence by the State.

Leo Tolstoy, who did not publicly identify as an anarchist but spoke of many ideals that could be classified as such, explained that a certain amount of disorder within a movement against the State is useful. He consistently critiqued the fraud of government, and his belief that the highest form of a just society would come about with the union of order and anarchy. In his notebooks, he wrote about the pertinence of nonviolence to bring about a peaceful society. Instead of violence, he stressed that changing public opinion through discussion is the most valuable way to eradicate government, and wrote of the supreme strength of the power and consciousness of truth (Marshall 378).

Several anarchist scholars from the late nineteenth century that have written about anarchy agree that mutual cooperation, rather than domination, is the state of existence that is most supported by human nature. These ideas are a threat to the rich and powerful who control and benefit from the policies of the State, which, they explain, has everything to lose from anarchist success, and have set the scene for much organized resistance to society today. In “Demanding the Impossible,” Peter Marshall (1992) outlines the ideas expressed by several influential anarchist scholars and philosophers about how a new society should arise and be managed.

Peter Kropotkin wrote about the aim of anarchism to construct a philosophy to comprehend “all the phenomena of nature-and therefore also the life of societies” (Kropotkin original year, in Marshall 1992: 318). He describes how mutual support and co-operation has facilitated the greatest social and biological progress of animal species (Marshall 1992: 318). In the place of law, he depicts how people would regulate their own relationships with voluntary contracts that no authority will enforce, in which the only incentive to keep them is common interest. He describes kind and understanding treatment towards individuals who commit crimes against others in this lawless society. He describes the commune as becoming the center daily life, and proposes collective ownership of all means of production (Marshall 1992: 326).

These methods of social relationships are important to keep in mind to offer as alternatives to change our current system. Hopefully people will be open-minded to the belief that these methods can and have worked in many societies, and that they are not hopeless in our own.

**Conflict Resolution**
The Occupy movement is young, and there is possibility for some to attempt to take control of the movement for their own agendas, or for conflicts between parties with different interests and values to cause damaging divisions. In order to figure out how to enhance the Occupy movement’s ability to build a social movement based on justice and equality, we can look to autonomous and egalitarian principles, and the ways in which other social movements and societies implement these ideas. In the paragraphs that follow, I first present the prevailing discourse about conflict resolution, and then review what egalitarian societies, social justice movements, and anarchist theory can add to our understanding of communication and conflict management.

Conflict and Resolution

While at Occupy, the frequency of arguments and tension escalated as time went by, for various reasons. The presence of police provocateurs built up with time. They consistently tried to pin people against each other and divide them. Being there long enough, it became quite obvious who was there because they wanted to be a part of the movement and who was there to create tension.

One afternoon, one heavy-set red-headed white man became so enraged that a woman was using the microphone to sing soothing music while some Occupiers were doing yoga on the South steps of City Hall, that he started yelling about how, by using the microphone, they were impeding on his First Amendment rights. Her singing was not very loud, and he could have easily done what everybody else did to get attention—a “mic-check,” to begin using the People’s microphone to make his statement known. However, he climbed up the stairs and began to aggressively yell at a group of women, not listening to a word they were saying but continuing to yell. When one Occupier asked the man to look him straight into the eye and tell him that he wasn’t, he was not able to do so. It then became obvious to everyone in the situation that he was a provocateur, and everyone left the situation.

However, provocateurs and outsiders from the movement were not the only ones that caused conflicts. Public drunkenness, actions under the influence of hard drugs, sexual assault, and theft use also caused frequent issues that divided the camp.

There were also other conflicts within the camp, including the lack of food caused by the Health Department that did not allow food to be cooked on site, threatening us with eviction. This was clearly an attempt to lower our morale and cause fewer people to stay at the Occupation, because food was often scarce. There were many people staying at the Occupy camp that were not used to being in a social living situation where everything that they needed was provided for them, and where the people around them were supportive. Although there

Something else that caused conflicts were different styles of living. Many people grew frustrated with people that they claimed were not there for the Occupation, but just using it as a place to party. Many of these people they were referring to, they called hippies and who liked to experiment with drugs or play music such as drum circles. However, as these frustrations grew people became more considerate, doing drugs and drinking inside their tents and not holding drum circles late into the night when others were trying to sleep.

Egalitarian Societies

The term ‘egalitarianism’ makes many of us think of protesting inequality. However, there are egalitarian societies that are not in direct opposition to an oppressor.
Hunter-gatherer societies generally do not verbally elaborate on equality extensively, but rather demonstrate it in their daily lives. Scholars that write about egalitarian societies agree that they have certain leveling mechanisms that serve to negotiate conflict.

In "Wandering Out to the Gods: Lessons in dispute resolution from the San," William Ury describes the cultural ideologies and traditions of the San, also known as the !Kung, !Kung San, or Dobe Ju’oansi, that are focused on preventing conflict and encouraging sharing and unaltering respect for one another. He describes a situation in which two girls are fighting over a blanket, and an elder of the tribe told them that “Bise,” the good god, gave the girl that blanket, and that she should show her happiness and appreciation to him by sharing it (Ury 1995) 23). In situations in which tensions are perceived between individuals early on, their community encourages them to discuss and resolve their problems before they escalate. He describes their conflict resolution process, the xotla, a meeting to discuss the issue at hand. During the xotla, even those not involved in the conflict can take part in the decision making process, which is resolved by consensus. He describes the tendencies of the !Kung for individuals to avoid assuming authority of any kind, and rather encourage everyone to voice their opinions. After complete consensus is reached, a tribal elder announces the decision (24).

While I was there, Occupy LA adopted a self-policing mechanism in which everybody is responsible for the safety and welfare of the group. It stated that, when Occupiers observe a conflict occurring, they should shout “Shanti-Sinha!” meaning “Peace Seen,” and stay to observe the situation. Others who hear this phrase have a duty to go to the scene of the conflict and observe and “create a space for conflict resolution.” This suggestion came from a girl representing the “Rainbow People,” a group of people who live in various intentional communities called “Rainbow Gatherings” around the world. She suggested this as a Proposal during the General Assembly. Immediately, when getting a “temperature-check,” a show of hands to see who is in favor, the vote was unanimous save for one man who did not agree with the policy because he said that they needed to take a tough stance towards drugs, and he was concerned that would not happen if the Shanti-Sinha method were in place. Drug use was a big problem at the camp. However, the woman confirmed that she was not suggesting replacing any other method that was already in place, but just adding to it. The second temperature-check was unanimous. In my opinion, this policy worked well in deflating some conflicts within Occupy Los Angeles, but it needed to be better explained as to what follows after observing the conflict. However, the fact that it held everybody accountable for the welfare of the group helped build community. As I have seen in other instances, when people are held accountable for their own actions, as well as the group, they are more likely to contribute to the well-being of the group, because they feel more personally invested as a member of the community, and that they have a purpose. What Shanti-Sinha does, as well, is create a space to initiate dialogue about the conflict, which is a good way to resolve things.

Creating dialogue has been very successful in terms of mediation of conflicts. According to Jeanette, mediators have been widely successful because they listen to the person or people involved in the conflict and express understanding for and validate their thoughts or feelings at the time of the conflict. The mediators are then able to level with them and explain that, although their thoughts and feelings are valid, there is a
certain point where conflict occurs, and then are often able to proceed to unravel and relieve the situation.

Jeanette organized mediators from Mediators Beyond Borders to come put on workshops and work with conflicts at the camp. She believes that this helped build solidarity in so many ways, because of the various levels that they worked with. She believes that the main problem with the GA is that many people do not articulate themselves because they fear that they don’t know how, and many people don’t know how to listen to each other. So the mediators started basic articulation and communication workshops. “So we’re talking about one workshop on listening. One workshop on responding. Not even communication, yet. This is the basic fundamentals of communication because what they observed is that that was lacking. So we have to build from that. We still have to take time to offer these services even though we are not in a camp-style fashion, but at least offer these services to those who want them because its going to help us.” The mediators also helped with the relationship that the Occupiers had with the Farmer’s Market, which had been strained because the market used the space of City Hall every Sunday before the Occupation arrived.

In “Ideology, Orientation to Conflict, and Mediation Discourse,” Professors of Alternative Dispute Resolution and originators of the transformative model of Mediation John Folger and Robert Baruch Bush address conflict resolution between different parties. The viewpoint of the authors is that the only appropriate response to conflict is collaborative problem solving that is based on the presence of a mediator. The authors claim that this method is consistent with the mainstream, individualist view of society. This ideology “views the human world as made up of radically separate individual beings, of equal worth but with different desires, whose nature it is to seek satisfaction of those individual needs and desires” (Folger and Bush 1994). This view discounts many societies in which decisions are made collectively for all people, and there is a focus on sharing rather than taking solely for ones self. The focus of individual needs over the group is a Western social construct that stresses every man for himself, but that is not the prevailing system in many egalitarian societies.

After my review of the various literature I used throughout this paper, my sense is that there is little conversation between the bodies of literature cited here. Some of the authors have important points about the pertinence of communicative bodies within these movements. Others adequately explain the creation of an alternative society using governing and economic structures that are based on equality and mutual cooperation. However, I did not find as many contemporary links between the decision-making and conflict resolving bodies of alternative societies and the use of these bodies in different social movements. I see potential is cross-pollinating this literature, so that the lessons from each may be used to build a working knowledge of egalitarian premises in social movements. This knowledge of societies and movements that employ these principles and ideas of what an alternative society could look like can be used to reinforce the visions and tactics of the Occupy movement.

Solidarity - Future of the Movement

According to Jacqueline, the Occupy movement needs to wake people up and educate on a global scale, not just on a national scale. We are focusing on the bailout and economic problems within the United States. However, we need to question where the
money they used came from in the first place. Our abuse of foreign countries, taking all of their resources while selling them back to them at a higher price, and then blaming them for not yet being developed is unacceptable. Once the movement becomes only a national issue, the movement will no longer be a revolutionary movement, but like most others. We need to address the issues abroad that are perpetuated or caused by the United States, such as global poverty and injustice, educate each other and hear foreign voices. The media is a limitless tool for us to accomplish this goal, but the movement needs to make it more of a priority. Occupations need to help each other out, nationally and globally. We need to address more than just the 1%, but for real change and equality, we need to completely abolish capitalism, because equality cannot exist under this system. Additionally, if we are going to fight for the 99%, we cannot exclude any group under that, and we need to address the fact that the United States killed Native Americans. People refer to ‘the better days,’ however, equality never existed here, and if we are combatting the system in the United States, nationalism and U.S pride needs to be addressed. Additionally, we cannot spend all our energy reoccupying a park. We need to Occupy foreclosed homes, which many Occupations are already doing or planning.

Conclusions

The role of government is to serve its people, and not the other way around, but it seems that this has been forgotten. According to John Locke, people in the state of nature are not subject to authority but actually consent to be governed. In theory, if the people have not consented to be governed, than the government is not legitimate by other means than tacit consent, which is debated (Tuckness 2011). However, when the government fails to protect the rights of their people, they have the right to rescind that consent and form a new government. Given this principle, it is our right as human beings to demand a system that benefits the majority of global citizens, and demand that we are equally represented, and to create it ourselves. Part of creating it ourselves is experimenting with what does and does not work, including methods of decision-making, conflict resolution, and building solidarity among the movements. However, as time goes by, we are learning. Occupy movements, as they have been taken away from their Occupation sites, are changing, but still existing, and I’m sure the whole world will be interested to see what they do next.

I learned so much about myself in the process of being in the Occupy movement, and this is ongoing. I learned that I have the ability to articulate myself under serious pressure, and make my voice heard at the scariest of times (yelling to riot cops, asking them if they believe in democracy as they were closing in on us at the Port of Long Beach). I also have the ability to be a source of calm and reason in many situations that are heated, and have found that I am able to level with people and sometimes mediate and diffuse situations. I also learned that I am passionate about healing, in many senses of the word, and that I feel very comfortable in close knit communities without the luxuries that many people think they need. These were all very valuable lessons to be had about myself.
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Bibliography


