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# From Occupy Wall Street to Occupy Everywhere

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It all started with an e-mail. On July 13 *Adbusters* magazine sent out a call to its 90,000-strong list proclaiming a Twitter hashtag (#OccupyWallStreet) and a date, September 17. It quickly spread among the mostly young, tech-savvy radical set, along with an especially alluring poster the magazine put together of a ballerina atop the Charging Bull statue, the financial district's totem to testosterone.

The idea became a meme, and the angel of history (or at least of the Internet) was somehow ready. Halfway into a revolutionary year—after the Arab Spring and Europe's tumultuous summer—cyberactivists in the United States were primed for a piece of the action. The *Adbusters* editors weren't the only ones organizing; similar occupations were already in the works, including a very well-laid plan to occupy Freedom Plaza in Washington, starting October 6.

Websites cropped up to gather news and announcements. US Day of Rage, the Twitter- and web-driven project of a determined IT strategist, endorsed the action, promoted it and started preparing with online nonviolence trainings and tactical plans. Then, in late August, the hacktivists of Anonymous signed on, posting menacing videos and flooding social media networks.

But a meme alone does not an occupation make. An occupation needs people on the ground. By early August, a band of activists in New York began meeting in public parks to plan. Many were fresh off the streets of Bloombergville, a three-week encampment near City Hall in protest of layoffs and cuts to social services. Others joined them, especially artists, students and anarchists—academic and otherwise. (US Day of Rage's founder was there too.) This "NYC General Assembly" met first at the Charging Bull, then at the Irish Hunger Memorial along the Hudson River and then at the south end of Tompkins Square Park. The turnout was usually around sixty to 100.

The General Assembly, which would eventually morph from a planning committee into the de facto decision-making body of the occupation, was a hodgepodge of procedures and hand signals with origins as various as Quakerism, ancient Athens, the *indignados* of Spain (some of whom were present) and the spokescouncils of the 1999 anti-globalization movement. Basically, it's an attempt to create a

nonhierarchical, egalitarian, consensus-driven process—the purest kind of democracy.

Of no small significance was that this was taking place in direct contradiction of what Wall Street has come to represent: the stranglehold on American politics and society by the interests of a wealthy few, a government by the corporations and apparently for them.

In its initial call *Adbusters* had posed the question, "What is our one demand?" Echoing the determination to oust Hosni Mubarak that temporarily unified Muslim Brothers with Christians and feminists in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the idea was that an occupation like this in the United States could similarly mount enough pressure to enact one critical, game-changing policy proposal. *Adbusters*, as well as people at the General Assembly, pitched in their suggestions: a "Tobin tax" on financial transactions, reinstating the Glass-Steagall Act or revoking corporate personhood. (Nicholas Kristof later rehearsed some of these in the *New York Times*.) But the discussions never seemed to get anywhere. No single demand seemed like enough to address the problems of the system, and few of these upstarts relished the thought of begging for anything from the powers that be.

Tabling that discussion week after week, the General Assembly focused on more practical matters. There were debates about tactics, fundraising, food and wrenching ones about how to build the GA's website. Over time, the sense emerged that demands weren't the right thing to be after. In the first place, it didn't seem likely that the 20,000 people *Adbusters* hoped for would appear anytime soon. (Even if they did, when 20,000 people had marched for a day on Wall Street in May, it hardly made a dent.) The more realistic and strategic goal, it seemed, was movement-building. Just as assemblies like this one had spread through Spain in the summer, and through Argentina after the economic crisis in 2001, they would try to plant the seeds for assemblies to grow around the city and around the country. These, in turn, could blossom into a significant, even effective, political movement. Specific demands might come later, after the movement grew.

To give you an idea of where this was starting from: the occupation began with just a few thousand dollars on hand and no idea who would show up.

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When September 17 finally arrived, people came from all over the country. Most of them had no idea what the General Assembly even was, much less what it had been up to. They came for their own reasons, united by the aesthetic appeal of swarming

the money-changers at their own temple. But their numbers were closer to 2,000 than 20,000.

The initial gathering point was the Charging Bull at Bowling Green, a few blocks south of Wall Street. People picketed around the barricades that protected the sculpture. Reverend Billy, an anti-consumerist performance artist, preached while a team of protest chaplains in white robes ministered with a cardboard cross. There were a surprising number of recommendations to invest in silver. LaRouchePAC furnished an excellent choir. Nobody knew what would happen next.

The plan—publicly at least—was to hold a General Assembly meeting at the Chase Manhattan Plaza terrace and then figure out the next step from there. But the terrace had been closed off the night before. Leaflets showing a map and alternate locations were circulated through the crowd. And after the tactics committee held some hasty, whispered huddles during a free-for-all open mic session, the decision was made to head for option two: Zuccotti Park, just a few blocks up Broadway, right between thoroughly barricaded Wall Street and the World Trade Center site.

And so it happened, without a hitch. After a few minutes' march, the crowd was packed together under a canopy of honeylocust trees for the first General Assembly meeting of the occupation.

As the day continued, as some people got settled in and others left, a few poked around on their smartphones to figure out just where they were. The skeletal Wikipedia entry for Zuccotti Park was enough: it is privately owned by Brookfield Office Properties, renamed in 2006 after Brookfield chair John Zuccotti. The name it once had is still displayed on the building across the street: Liberty Plaza. Like Tahrir ("Liberation") Square in Cairo. Or Freedom Plaza in DC. Too perfect.

That night the crowd continued to thin, down to perhaps 200. As the evening wore on, police massed. More than twenty empty vans drove by slowly in a line, their sirens flashing. Two rows of officers, with white plastic cuffs dangling from their belts, lined up along Broadway. A dispersal seemed imminent. White-shirted commanders and other higher-ups whispered. Would-be occupiers assembled, discussed and then broke up into smaller groups. A meditation-and-massage circle formed to help people relax.

By 11 PM, THOUGH, AN ORDER HAD BEEN GIVEN TO STAND DOWN. THE SECOND ROW OF STORM TROOPS DISAPPEARED, AND THE REMAINING OFFICERS SEEMED TO BE THERE ONLY AS SPECTATORS. PROTESTERS, NOW OCCUPIERS, GOT OUT SLEEPING BAGS, OR FOUND CARDBOARD, AND TRIED TO SLEEP ON THE GRANITE.

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The following week was a sequence of ups and downs for those on the plaza, who started calling themselves, in interviews and chants, “the 99 percent.” There were never more than a few hundred of them, and police made incursions and arrests nearly every day, which kept everyone on edge. After tents donated by rapper Lupe Fiasco were put up on September 19 for fear of rain, police responded with seven violent arrests in three visits the next morning. But by September 21 videos of occupiers being grabbed and dragged had gone viral, and the story had made the front page of New York’s free *Metro* newspaper.

Each time there was an incident with the police, media attention increased; the police, it sometimes seemed, were trying to do the occupation a favor. Young women pepper-sprayed without provocation, teenagers slammed onto the pavement, about 700 arrested on the Brooklyn Bridge—each episode brought more cameras, more sympathy, more people and more momentum.

At first, the reporters wanted to talk only to the banged-up and bloodied. Then they started asking just about everyone on the plaza, including one another, “Why are you here?” The wide array of responses they got, together with those on display in the plaza’s collage of hundreds of cardboard signs, became a common excuse for reporters to declare the whole thing incoherent. Trained to work from press conferences and sound bites, many of them were lost on the peculiar process of the General Assembly and the message clearly implied by a utopian encampment in the middle of the financial district. Expecting to find the usual formula of an ineffective leftist protest, they were sent reeling by their inability to find some vague, though catchy, overarching slogan. Instead, they ogled the handful of women protesting topless.

With much of the coverage centered on the arrests, what bled led and what didn’t was forgotten. Protesters tended to be portrayed as passive victims of police mistreatment. But in many cases they weren’t.

Few reports mentioned that while the 700 protesters were waiting to be arrested on the Brooklyn Bridge, they sat down, sang songs, recited chants and held a discussion about dispelling fear. When the first arrest videos went viral, it was rarely noticed that protesters were arrested while committing conscious acts of civil disobedience: holding down an illicit tarp that was protecting equipment from the rain, continuing a speech about having courage after being ordered to stop, writing the word “love” on the sidewalk in chalk. (Some later incidents of mass arrest took place less purposefully, and less on the protesters’ terms.) Nor has it been much

remembered what kind of backdrop these early moments stood against: the police commanders wandering through the plaza and waking people at dawn, the ever-present worry of a forced dispersal, the sense of isolation when the TV trucks were gone.

Working with the activist habit of *ressentiment*, acquired by seeing protest after protest fail to make headlines, the organizers planned much more for creating their own media than serving anyone else's. From day one, they had a (theoretically) twenty-four-hour lifestream, allowing thousands of people around the world to watch what was going on in the plaza and on marches in real time. The plaza's generator-powered media center blasted out tweets, YouTube videos, blog posts and more, keeping savvy supporters informed and giving Anonymous lots of material to disseminate. But the level of preparation for more traditional media, with much greater reach and potential to expand the movement, was limited. At first it was mainly just one valiant, black-clad college student with no previous media experience who was assigning interviews, posting communiqués online, keeping reporters informed and, unintentionally, spreading false rumors. It's rare, to say the least, to find a place so full of people under 30 for whom being on national television has so quickly become commonplace.

People began getting the message nonetheless. After two weeks, and two Saturdays of mass arrests, the kinds of groups that previously didn't want to be caught dead near the dirty radicals on Liberty Plaza started to join in, to see themselves as occupiers too: labor unions, student clubs, an ex-governor of New York, parents and grandparents. Surprise celebrity visits started becoming the norm. Just over two weeks in, more than 10,000 people marched down Broadway to Liberty Plaza. Meanwhile, the food committee added a dishwashing area, outreach turned from a box of fliers to a well-staffed table and sanitation got a new set of brooms.

Sister occupations have been appearing all over the country and the world, in big cities and smaller ones, often using a similar assembly model, taking back public space and turning it into an agora, a place where politics might, finally, be about people. #OccupyWallStreet—the action, the idea, the meme—has become #OccupyEverywhere. It has started a movement.

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