

For a discussion on 'Democracy'

Excerpt: pp.82-95 'Democracy'

- Graeber, David (2014) *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press

Excerpt: pp.87-98 'Why did the movement refuse to make demands'

- Graeber, David (2014) *The Democracy Project* New York: Random House

if revolution will probably never take such an apocalyptic form. This of course brings up the “who will do the dirty jobs?” question—one which always gets thrown at anarchists or other utopians. Peter Kropotkin long ago pointed out the fallacy of the argument. There’s no particular reason dirty jobs have to exist. If one divided up the unpleasant tasks equally, that would mean all the world’s top scientists and engineers would have to do them too; one could expect the creation of self-cleaning kitchens and coal-mining robots almost immediately.

All this is something of an aside though because what I really want to do in this final section is focus on:

(3) DEMOCRACY

This might give the reader a chance to have a glance at what anarchist, and anarchist-inspired, organizing is actually like—some of the contours of the new world now being built in the shell of the old—and to show what the historical-ethnographic perspective I’ve been trying to develop here, our non-existent science, might be able to contribute to it.

The first cycle of the new global uprising—what the press still insists on referring to, increasingly ridiculously, as “the anti-globalization movement”—began with the autonomous municipalities of Chiapas and came to a head with the *asambleas barrales* of Buenos Aires, and cities throughout Argentina. There is hardly room here to tell the whole story: beginning

with the Zapatistas’ rejection of the idea of seizing power and their attempt instead to create a model of democratic self-organization to inspire the rest of Mexico; their initiation of an international network (People’s Global Action, or PGA) which then put out the calls for days of action against the WTO (in Seattle), IMF (in Washington, Prague...) and so on; and finally, the collapse of the Argentine economy, and the overwhelming popular uprising which, again, rejected the very idea that one could find a solution by replacing one set of politicians with another. The slogan of the Argentine movement was, from the start, *que se vayan todos*—get rid of the lot of them. Instead of a new government they created a vast network of alternative institutions, starting with popular assemblies to govern each urban neighborhood (the only limitation on participation is that one cannot be employed by a political party), hundreds of occupied, worker-managed factories, a complex system of “barter” and newfangled alternative currency system to keep them in operation—in short, an endless variation on the theme of direct democracy.

All of this has happened completely below the radar screen of the corporate media, which also missed the point of the great mobilizations. The organization of these actions was meant to be a living illustration of what a truly democratic world might be like, from the festive puppets to the careful organization of affinity groups and spokescouncils, all operating without a leadership structure, always based on principles of consensus-based direct democracy. It was the kind of organization which most people would have, had they

simply heard it proposed, written off as a pipe-dream; but it worked, and so effectively that the police departments of city after city were completely flummoxed with how to deal with them. Of course, this also had something to do with the unprecedented tactics (hundreds of activists in fairy suits tickling police with feather dusters, or padded with so many inflatable inner tubes, and rubber cushions they seemed to roll along like the Michelin man over barricades, incapable of damaging anyone else but also pretty much impervious to police batons...), which completely confused traditional categories of violence and nonviolence.

When protesters in Seattle chanted "this is what democracy looks like," they meant to be taken literally. In the best tradition of direct action, they not only confronted a certain form of power, exposing its mechanisms and attempting literally to stop it in its tracks: they did it in a way which demonstrated why the kind of social relations on which it is based were unnecessary. This is why all the condescending remarks about the movement being dominated by a bunch of dumb kids with no coherent ideology completely missed the mark. The diversity was a function of the decentralized form of organization, and this organization *was* the movement's ideology.

The key term in the new movement is "process," by which is meant, decision-making process. In North America, this is almost invariably done through some process of finding consensus. This is as I mentioned much less ideologically stifling than it may sound because the assumption behind all good consensus process is that one should not even try to

convert others to one's overall point of view; the point of consensus process is to allow a group to decide on a common course of action. Instead of voting proposals up and down, then, proposals are worked and reworked, scotched or reinvented, until one ends up with something everyone can live with. When it comes to the final stage, actually "finding consensus," there are two levels of possible objection: one can "stand aside," which is to say "I don't like this and won't participate but I wouldn't stop anyone else from doing it," or "block," which has the effect of a veto. One can only block if one feels a proposal is in violation of the fundamental principles or reasons for being of a group. One might say that the function which in the US constitution is relegated to the courts, of striking down legislative decisions that violate constitutional principles, is here relegated to anyone with the courage to actually stand up against the combined will of the group (though of course there are also ways of challenging unprincipled blocks).

One could go on at length about the elaborate and surprisingly sophisticated methods that have been developed to ensure all this works; of forms of modified consensus required for very large groups; of the way consensus itself reinforces the principle of decentralization by ensuring one doesn't really want to bring proposals before very large groups unless one has to, of means of ensuring gender equity and resolving conflict... The point is this is a form of direct democracy which is very different than the kind we usually associate with the term—or, for that matter, with the kind usually employed by European or North

American anarchists of earlier generations, or still employed, say, in urban Argentine *asambleas*. In North America, consensus process emerged more than anything else through the feminist movement, as part of broad backlash against some of the more obnoxious, self-aggrandizing macho leadership styles of the '60s New Left. Much of the procedure was originally adopted from the Quakers, and Quaker-inspired groups; the Quakers, in turn, claim to have been inspired by Native American practice. How much the latter is really true is, in historical terms, difficult to determine. Nonetheless, Native American decision-making did normally work by some form of consensus. Actually, so do most popular assemblies around the world now, from the Tzeltal or Tzotzil or Tojolobal-speaking communities in Chiapas to Malagasy *fokon'olona*. After having lived in Madagascar for two years, I was startled, the first time I started attending meetings of the Direct Action Network in New York, by how familiar it all seemed—the main difference was that the DAN process was so much more formalized and explicit. It had to be, since everyone in DAN was just figuring out how to make decisions this way, and everything had to be spelled out; whereas in Madagascar, everyone had been doing this since they learned to speak.

In fact, as anthropologists are aware, just about every known human community which has to come to group decisions has employed some variation of what I'm calling "consensus process"—every one, that is, which is not in some way or another drawing

on the tradition of ancient Greece. Majoritarian democracy, in the formal, Roberts Rules of Order-type sense rarely emerges of its own accord. It's curious that almost no one, anthropologists included, ever seems to ask oneself why this should be.

An hypothesis.

Majoritarian democracy was, in its origins, essentially a military institution.

Of course it's the peculiar bias of Western historiography that this is the only sort of democracy that is seen to count as "democracy" at all. We are usually told that democracy originated in ancient Athens—like science, or philosophy, it was a Greek invention. It's never entirely clear what this is supposed to mean. Are we supposed to believe that before the Athenians, it never really occurred to anyone, anywhere, to gather all the members of their community in order to make joint decisions in a way that gave everyone equal say? That would be ridiculous. Clearly there have been plenty of egalitarian societies in history—many far more egalitarian than Athens, many that must have existed before 500 BCE—and obviously, they must have had some kind of procedure for coming to decisions for matters of collective importance. Yet somehow, it is always assumed that these procedures, whatever they might have been, could not have been, properly speaking, "democratic."

Even scholars with otherwise impeccable radical credentials, promoters of direct democracy, have been known to bend themselves into pretzels trying to justify this attitude. Non-Western egalitarian

tarian communities are “kin-based,” argues Murray Bookchin. (And Greece was not? Of course the Athenian agora was not itself kin-based but neither is a Malagasy *fokon’olona* or Balinese *sekra*. So what?) “Some might speak of Iroquois or Berber democracy,” argued Cornelius Castoriadis, “but this is an abuse of the term. These are primitive societies which assume the social order is handed to them by gods or spirits, not self-constituted by the people themselves as in Athens.” (Really? In fact the “League of the Iroquois” was a treaty organization, seen as a common agreement created in historical times, and subject to constant renegotiation.) The arguments never make sense. But they don’t really have to because we are not really dealing with arguments at all here, so much as with the brush of a hand.

The real reason for the unwillingness of most scholars to see a Sulawesi or Tallensi village council as “democratic”—well, aside from simple racism, the reluctance to admit anyone Westerners slaughtered with such relative impunity were quite on the level as Pericles—is that they do not vote. Now, admittedly, this is an interesting fact. Why not? If we accept the idea that a show of hands, or having everyone who supports a proposition stand on one side of the plaza and everyone against stand on the other, are not really such incredibly sophisticated ideas that they never would have occurred to anyone until some ancient genius “invented” them, then why are they so rarely employed? Again, we seem to have an example of explicit rejection. Over and over, across the world, from Australia to Siberia, egalitarian communities have preferred some variation on consensus process. Why?

The explanation I would propose is this: it is much easier, in a face-to-face community, to figure out what most members of that community want to do, than to figure out how to convince those who do not to go along with it. Consensus decision-making is typical of societies where there would be no way to compel a minority to agree with a majority decision—either because there is no state with a monopoly of coercive force, or because the state has nothing to do with local decision-making. If there is no way to compel those who find a majority decision distasteful to go along with it, then the last thing one would want to do is to hold a vote: a public contest which someone will be seen to lose. Voting would be the most likely means to guarantee humiliations, resentments, hatreds, in the end, the destruction of communities. What is seen as an elaborate and difficult process of finding consensus is, in fact, a long process of making sure no one walks away feeling that their views have been totally ignored.

Majority democracy, we might say, can only emerge when two factors coincide:

1. a feeling that people should have equal say in making group decisions, and
2. a coercive apparatus capable of enforcing those decisions.

For most of human history, it has been extremely unusual to have both at the same time. Where egalitarian societies exist, it is also usually considered wrong to impose systematic coercion. Where a machinery of coercion did exist, it did not even occur to those wielding it that they were enforcing any sort of popular will.

It is of obvious relevance that Ancient Greece was one of the most competitive societies known to history. It was a society that tended to make everything into a public contest, from athletics to philosophy or tragic drama or just about anything else. So it might not seem entirely surprising that they made political decision-making into a public contest as well. Even more crucial though was the fact that decisions were made by a populace in arms. Aristotle, in his *Polities*, remarks that the constitution of a Greek city-state will normally depend on the chief arm of its military: if this is cavalry, it will be an aristocracy, since horses are expensive. If hoplite infantry, it will have an oligarchy, as all could not afford the armor and training. If its power was based in the navy or light infantry, one could expect a democracy, as anyone can row, or use a sling. In other words if a man is armed, then one pretty much has to take his opinions into account. One can see how this worked at its starkest in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, which tells the story of an army of Greek mercenaries who suddenly find themselves leaderless and lost in the middle of Persia. They elect new officers, and then hold a collective vote to decide what to do next. In a case like this, even if the vote was 60/40, everyone could see the balance of forces and what would happen if things actually came to blows.

Every vote was, in a real sense, a conquest. Roman legions could be similarly democratic; this was the main reason they were never allowed to enter the city of Rome. And when Machiavelli revived the notion of a democratic republic at the dawn of the "modern" era, he immediately reverted to the notion of a populace in arms.

This in turn might help explain the term "democracy" itself, which appears to have been coined as something of a slur by its elitist opponents: it literally means the "force" or even "violence" of the people. *Kratos*, not *archos*. The elitists who coined the term always considered democracy not too far from simple rioting or mob rule; though of course their solution was the permanent conquest of the people by someone else. And ironically, when they did manage to suppress democracy for this reason, which was usually, the result was that the only way the general populace's will was known was precisely through rioting, a practice that became quite institutionalized in, say, imperial Rome or eighteenth-century England.

All this is not to say that direct democracies—as practiced, for example, in medieval cities or New England town meetings—were not normally orderly and dignified procedures; though one suspects that here too, in actual practice, there was a certain baseline of consensus-seeking going on. Still, it was this military undertone which allowed the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, like almost all other literate men of their day, to take it for granted that what they called "democracy"—by which they meant, direct democracy—was in its nature the most unstable, tumultuous form of government, not to mention one which endangers the rights of minorities (the specific minority they had in mind in this case being the rich). It was only once the term "democracy" could be almost completely transformed to incorporate the principle of representation—a term which itself has a very curious history, since as Cornelius Castoriadis

notes, it originally referred to representatives of the people before the kings, internal ambassadors in fact, rather than those who wielded power in any sense themselves—that it was rehabilitated, in the eyes of well-born political theorists, and took on the meaning it has today.

In a sense then anarchists think all those right-wing political theorists who insist that “America is not a democracy; it’s a republic” are quite correct. The difference is that anarchists have a problem with that. They think it ought to be a democracy. Though increasing numbers have come to accept that the traditional elitist criticism of majoritarian direct democracy is not entirely baseless either.

I noted earlier that all social orders are in some sense at war with themselves. Those unwilling to establish an apparatus of violence for enforcing decisions necessarily have to develop an apparatus for creating and maintaining social consensus (at least in that minimal sense of ensuring malcontents can still feel they have freely chosen to go along with bad decisions); as an apparent result, the internal war ends up projected outwards into endless night battles and forms of spectral violence. Majoritarian direct democracy is constantly threatening to make those lines of force explicit. For this reason it does tend to be rather unstable: or more precisely, if it does last, it’s because its institutional forms (the medieval city, New England town council, for that matter Gallup polls, referendums...) are almost invariably ensconced within a larger framework of governance in which ruling elites

use that very instability to justify their ultimate monopoly of the means of violence. Finally, the threat of this instability becomes an excuse for a form of “democracy” so minimal that it comes down to nothing more than insisting that ruling elites should occasionally consult with “the public”—in carefully staged contests, replete with rather meaningless jousts and tournaments—to reestablish their right to go on making their decisions for them.

It’s a trap. Bouncing back and forth between the two ensures it will remain extremely unlikely that one could ever imagine it would be possible for people to manage their own lives, without the help of “representatives.” It’s for this reason the new global movement has begun by reinventing the very meaning of democracy. To do so ultimately means, once again, coming to terms with the fact that “we”—whether as “the West” (whatever that means), as the “modern world,” or anything else—are not really as special as we like to think we are; that we’re not the only people ever to have practiced democracy; that in fact, rather than disseminating democracy around the world, “Western” governments have been spending at least as much time inserting themselves into the lives of people who have been practicing democracy for thousands of years, and in one way or another, telling them to cut it out.

One of the most encouraging things about these new, anarchist-inspired movements is that they propose a new form of internationalism. Older, communist internationalism had some very beautiful ideals, but in organizational terms, everyone basically

flowed one way. It became a means for regimes outside Europe and its settler colonies to learn Western styles of organization: party structures, plenaries, purges, bureaucratic hierarchies, secret police... This time—the second wave of internationalism one could call it, or just, anarchist globalization—the movement of organizational forms has largely gone the other way. It's not just consensus process: the idea of mass non-violent direct action first developed in South Africa and India; the current network model was first proposed by rebels in Chiapas; even the notion of the affinity group came out of Spain and Latin America. The fruits of ethnography—and the techniques of ethnography—could be enormously helpful here if anthropologists can get past their—however understandable—hesitancy, owing to their own often squalid colonial history, and come to see what they are sitting on not as some guilty secret (which is nonetheless their guilty secret, and no one else's) but as the common property of humankind.

ANTHROPOLOGY

(in which the author somewhat reluctantly bites the hand that feeds him)

The final question—one that I've admittedly been rather avoiding up to now—is why anthropologists haven't, so far? I have already described why I think academics, in general, have rarely felt much affinity with anarchism. I've talked a little about the radical inclinations in much early twentieth-century anthropology, which often showed a very strong affinity with anarchism, but that seemed to largely evaporate over time. It's all a little odd. Anthropologists are after all the only group of scholars who know anything about actually-existing stateless societies; many have actually lived in corners of the world where states have ceased to function or at least temporarily pulled up stakes and left, and people are managing their own affairs autonomously; if nothing else, they are keenly aware that the most commonplace assumptions about what would happen in the absence of a state ("but people would just kill each other!") are factually untrue.

Why, then?

Well, there are any number of reasons. Some are understandable enough. If anarchism is, essentially, an ethics of practice, then meditating on anthropological practice tends to kick up a lot of unpleasant things. Particularly if one concentrates on the experience of anthropological fieldwork—which is what anthropologists invariably tend to do when they

more likely to enter college, more likely to finish college, *and* more likely to be poor, the three elements that often lead to greater political consciousness. Labor union participation still lags slightly: only 45 percent of union members are women, but if current trends continue, a majority will be women in eight years. Labor economist John Schmitt observes: “We’ve seen a big increase over the last quarter century of women in unions, particularly as the unionization of the service sector expands,” he states. “The perception that unions are great for white guys in their 50s is false.”¹²

Moreover, this convergence is beginning to change our very conceptions of work. Here I think Konczal got it wrong. It’s not that the 99 percenters are not thinking about the dignity of labor. Quite the contrary. They are broadening our conception of meaningful work to include everything we do that isn’t for ourselves.

QUESTION 4

Why did the movement refuse to make demands of or engage with the existing political system? And why did that refusal make the movement more compelling rather than less?

One would imagine that people in such a state of desperation would wish for some immediate, pragmatic solution to their dilemmas. Which makes it all the more striking that they were drawn to a movement that refused to appeal directly to existing political institutions at all.

Certainly this came as a great surprise to members of the corporate media, so much so that most refused to acknowledge what was happening right before their eyes. From the original, execrable, Ginia Bellafante piece in the *Times*, there has been an endless drumbeat coming from media of all sorts accusing the movement of a lack of seriousness, owing to its refusal to issue a concrete set of demands. Almost every time I’m interviewed by a mainstream journalist about Occupy Wall Street I get some variation of the same lecture:

How are you going to get anywhere if you refuse to create a leadership structure or make a practical list of demands? And what's with all this anarchist nonsense—the consensus, the sparkly fingers? Don't you realize all this radical language is going to alienate people? You're never going to be able to reach regular, mainstream Americans with this sort of thing!

Asking why OWS refuses to create a leadership structure, and asking why we don't come up with concrete policy statements, is of course two ways of asking the same thing: Why don't we engage with the existing political structure so as to ultimately become a part of it?

If one were compiling a scrapbook of worst advice ever given, this sort of thing might well merit an honorable place. Since the financial crash of 2008, there have been endless attempts to kick off a national movement against the depredations of America's financial elites taking the approach such journalists recommended. All failed. Most failed miserably.^e It was only when a movement appeared that resolutely refused to take the traditional path, that rejected the existing political order entirely as inherently corrupt, that called for the complete reinvention of American democracy, that occupations immediately began to blossom across the country. Clearly, the movement did not succeed despite the anarchist element. It succeeded *because* of it.

For “small-a” anarchists such as myself—that is, the sort willing to work in broad coalitions as long as they work on horizontal principles—this is what we'd always dreamed of. For decades, the anarchist movement had been putting much of our creative energy into developing forms of egalitarian political process that actually work; forms of direct democracy that actually could operate within self-governing communities outside of any state. The whole project was based in a kind of faith that freedom is contagious. We all knew it was practically impossible to convince the average American that a truly democratic society was possible through rhetoric. But it was possible to show them. The experience of watching a group of a thousand, or two thousand, people making collective decisions without a leadership structure, motivated only by principle and

solidarity, can change one's most fundamental assumptions about what politics, or for that matter, human life, could actually be like. Back in the days of the Global Justice Movement we thought that if we exposed enough people, around the world, to these new forms of direct democracy, and traditions of direct action, that a new, global, democratic culture would begin to emerge. But as noted above, we never really broke out of the activist ghetto; most Americans never even knew that direct democracy was so central to our identity, distracted as they were by media images of young men in balaclavas breaking plate glass windows, and the endless insistence of reporters that the whole argument was about the merits of something they insisted on calling "free trade."^f By the time of the antiwar movements after 2003, which mobilized hundreds of thousands, activism in America had fallen back on the old-fashioned vertical politics of top-down coalitions, charismatic leaders, and marching around with signs. Many of us diehards kept the faith. After all, we had dedicated our lives to the principle that something like this would eventually happen. But we had also, in a certain way, failed to notice that we'd stop really believing that we could actually win.

And then it happened. The last time I went to Zuccotti Park, before the eviction, and watched a sprawling, diverse group that ranged from middle-aged construction workers to young artists using all our old hand signals in mass meetings, my old friend Priya, the tree sitter and eco-anarchist now established in the park as a video documentarian, admitted to me, "Every few hours I do have to pinch myself to make sure it isn't all a dream."

So this is the ultimate question: not just why an anti-Wall Street movement finally took off—to be honest, for the first few years after the 2008 collapse, many had been scratching their heads over why one hadn't—but why it took the form it did? Again, there are obvious answers. One thing that unites almost everyone in America who is not part of the political class, whether right or left, is a revulsion of politicians. "Washington" in particular is perceived to be an alien bubble of power and influence, fundamentally corrupt. Since 2008, the fact that Washington exists to serve the purposes of

Wall Street has become almost impossible to ignore. Still, this does not explain why so many were drawn to a movement that comprehensively rejected existing political institutions of any sort.

I think the answer is once again generational. The refrain of the earliest occupiers at Zuccotti Park when it came to their financial, educational, and work lives was: “I played by the rules. I did exactly what everyone told me I was supposed to do. And look where that got me!” Exactly the same could be said of these young people’s experience of politics.

For most Americans in their early twenties, their first experience of political engagement came in the elections of 2006 and 2008, when young people turned out in roughly twice the numbers they usually did, and voted overwhelmingly for the Democrats. As a candidate, Barack Obama ran a campaign carefully designed to appeal to progressive youth, with spectacular results. It’s hard to remember that Obama not only ran as a candidate of “Change,” but used language that drew liberally from that of radical social movements (“Yes we can!” was adapted from César Chávez’s United Farm Workers movement, “Be the change!” is a phrase often attributed to Gandhi), and that as a former community organizer, and member of the left-wing New Party, he was one of the few candidates in recent memory who could be said to have emerged from a social movement background rather than from the usual smoke-filled rooms. What’s more, he organized his grassroots campaign much like a social movement; young volunteers were encouraged not just to phone-bank and go door-to-door but to create enduring organizations that would continue to work for progressive causes—support strikes, create food banks, organize local environmental campaigns—long after the election. All this, combined with the fact that Obama was to be the first African-American president, gave young people a sense that they were participating in a genuinely transformative moment in American politics.

No doubt most of the young people who worked for, or supported, the Obama campaign were uncertain just how transformative all this would be. But most were ready for genuinely profound changes in the very structure of American democracy. Remember that all this was happening in a country where there is such a straitjacket on acceptable political discourse—what a politician or media pundit can say without being written off as a member of the lunatic fringe—that the views of very large segments of the American public simply are never voiced at all. To give a sense of how radical is the disconnect between acceptable opinion, and the actual feelings of American voters, consider a pair of polls conducted by Rasmussen, the first in December 2008, right after Obama was elected, the second in April 2011. A broad sampling of Americans was asked which economic system they preferred: capitalism or socialism? In 2008, 15 percent felt the United States would be better off adopting a socialist system; three years later, the number had gone up, to one in five. Even more striking was the breakdown by age: the younger the respondent, the more likely they were to object to the idea of spending the rest of their lives under a capitalist system. Among Americans between fifteen and twenty-five, a plurality did still prefer capitalism: 37 percent, as opposed to 33 percent in favor of socialism. (The remaining 30 percent remained unsure.) But think about what this means here. It means that almost two thirds of America's youth are willing to at least consider the idea of jettisoning the capitalist system entirely! In a country where most have never seen a single politician, TV pundit, or talking head willing to reject capitalism in principle, or to use the term "socialism" as anything but a term of condescension and abuse, this is genuinely extraordinary. Granted, for that very reason, it's hard to know exactly what young people who say they prefer "socialism" actually think they're embracing. One has to assume: not an economic system modeled on that of North Korea. What then? Sweden? Canada? It's impossible to say. But in a way it's also beside the point. Most Americans might not be sure what socialism is supposed to be, but they do know a great deal about capitalism, and if "socialism" means anything to them, it

means “the other thing,” or perhaps better,” *something*, pretty much anything, really, as long as it isn’t that!” To get a sense of just how extreme matters have become, another poll asked Americans to choose between capitalism and communism—and one out of ten Americans actually stated they would prefer a Soviet-style system to the economic system existing today.

In 2008, young Americans preferred Obama to John McCain by a rate of 68 percent to 30 percent—again, an approximately two-thirds margin.

It seems at the very least reasonable to assume that most young Americans who cast their votes for Obama expected a little more than what they got. They felt they were voting for a transformative figure. Many did clearly expect some kind of fundamental change in the system, even if they weren’t sure what. How, then, might one expect such a young American voter to feel on discovering that they had in fact elected a moderate conservative?

This might seem an extreme statement by the standards of mainstream political discourse but I’m really just using the word “conservative” in the literal sense of the term. That literal sense is now rarely used. Nowadays, in the United States at least, “conservative” has mainly come to be used for “right-wing radical,” whereas its long-standing literal meaning was “someone whose main political imperative is to conserve existing institutions, to protect the status quo.” This is precisely what Obama has turned out to be. Almost all his greatest political efforts have been aimed at preserving some institutional structure under threat: the banking system, the auto industry, even the health insurance industry. Obama’s main argument in calling for health care reform was that the existing system, based on for-profit private insurers, was not economically viable over the long term, and that some kind of change was going to be necessary. What was his solution? Instead of pushing a genuinely radical—or even liberal—restructuring of the system toward fairness and sustainability, he instead revived a Republican model first proposed in the 1990s as the conservative alternative to the Clintons’ universal health plan. That model’s details were hammered out in right-wing think tanks like the

Heritage Foundation and initially put into practice by a Republican governor of Massachusetts. Its appeal was essentially conservative: it didn't solve the problem of how to create a fair and sensible health care system; it solved the problem of how to preserve the existing unfair and unsustainable for-profit system in a form that might allow it to endure for at least another generation.

Considering the state of crisis the U.S. economy was in when Obama took over in 2008, it required perversely heroic efforts to respond to a historic catastrophe by keeping everything more or less exactly as it was. Yet Obama did expend those heroic efforts, and the result was that, in every dimension, the status quo did indeed remain intact. No part of the system was shaken up. There were no bank nationalizations, no breakups of "too big to fail" institutions, no major changes in finance laws, no change in the structure of the auto industry, or of any other industry, no change in labor laws, drug laws, surveillance laws, monetary policy, education policy, transportation policy, energy policy, military policy, or—most crucially of all, despite campaign pledges—the role of money in the political system. In exchange for massive infusions of money from the country's Treasury to rescue them from ruin, industries from finance to manufacturing to health care were required to make only marginal changes to their practices.

The "progressive community" in the United States is defined by left-leaning voters and activists who believe that working through the Democratic Party is the best way to achieve political change in America. The best way to get a sense of their current state of mind, I find, is to read discussions on the liberal blog Daily Kos. By the third year of Obama's first term, the level of rage—even hatred—directed against the president on this blog was simply extraordinary.⁸ He was regularly accused of being a fraud, a liar, a secret Republican who had intentionally flubbed every opportunity for progressive change presented to him in the name of "bipartisan compromise." The intensity of the hatred many of these debates revealed might seem surprising, but it makes perfect sense if you consider that these were people passionately committed to the idea it *should* be possible for progressive policies to be enacted in the

United States through electoral means. Obama's failure to do so would seem to leave one with little choice but to conclude that any such project is impossible. After all, how could there have been a more perfect alignment of the political stars than there was in 2008? That year saw a wave election that left Democrats in control of both houses of Congress, a Democratic president elected on a platform of "Change" coming to power at a moment of economic crisis so profound that radical measures of some sort were unavoidable, and at a time when Republican economic policies were utterly discredited and popular rage against the nation's financial elites was so intense that most Americans would have supported almost any policy directed against them. Polls at the time indicated that Americans were overwhelmingly in favor of bailing out mortgage holders, but not bailing out "too big to fail" banks, whatever the negative impact on the economy. Obama's position here was not only the opposite, but actually more conservative than George W. Bush's: the outgoing Bush administration did agree, under pressure from Democratic representative Barney Frank, to include mortgage write-downs in the TARP program, but only if Obama approved. He chose not to. It's important to remember this because a mythology has since developed that Obama opened himself up to criticism that he was a radical socialist because he went too far; in fact, the Republican Party was a spent and humiliated force, and only managed to revive itself because the Obama administration refused to provide an ideological alternative and instead adopted most of the Republicans' economic positions.

Yet no radical change was enacted; Wall Street gained even greater control over the political process, the "progressive" brand was tainted in most voters' minds by becoming identified with what were inherently conservative, corporate-friendly positions, and since Republicans proved the only party willing to take radical positions of any kind, the political center swung even further to the right. Clearly, if progressive change was not possible through electoral means in 2008, it simply isn't going to be possible at all. And that is exactly what very large numbers of young Americans appear to have concluded.

The numbers speak for themselves. Where youth turnout in 2008 was three times what it had been four years before, two years after Obama's election, it had already dropped by 60 percent. It's not so much that young voters switched sides—those who showed up continued to vote for the Democrats at about the same rate as before—as that they gave up on the process altogether,^h allowing the largely middle-aged Tea Partiers to dominate the election, and the Obama administration, in reaction, to compliantly swing even further to the right.

So in civic affairs as in economic ones, a generation of young people had every reason to feel they'd done exactly what they were supposed to do according to the rulebook—and got worse than nothing. What Obama had robbed them of was precisely the thing he so famously promised: hope—hope of any meaningful change via institutional means in their lifetimes. If they wanted to see their actual problems addressed, if they wanted to see any sort of democratic transformation in America, it was going to have to be through other means.

QUESTION 5

But why an explicitly revolutionary movement?

Here we come to the most challenging question of all. It's clear that one of the main reasons OWS worked was its very radicalism. In fact, one of the most remarkable things about it is that it was not just a popular movement, not even just a radical movement, but a revolutionary movement. It was kicked off by anarchists and revolutionary socialists—and in the earliest meetings, when its basic themes and principles were first being hammered down, the revolutionary socialists were actually the more conservative faction. Mainstream allies regularly try to soft-pedal this background; right-wing commentators often inveigh that “if only” ordinary Americans understood who the originators of OWS were, they would scatter in revulsion. In fact, there is every reason to believe that not only are