

REVIEW ESSAY

With insight and a raised fist: *Translating Anarchy* on Occupy Wall Street in context

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Few things have excited the managers of criticism more than the possibility to endlessly express their disappointment at the failures of *Occupy Wall Street*. On the other hand, expressing solidarity with OWS and a systematic evaluation of its importance in a given historical context has not been made easier by the strident voices of unmeasured appraisal, either. Mark Bray's beautiful account of the anarchist dimension of OWS, *Translating Anarchy*, is the antidote for all those driven crazy by the leftist noise around OWS: honest, adequately modest and properly irreverent, this ethnography of OWS stands out as some of the best ethnographically informed reflection on the topic. The writing is accessible; populist in the sense of opening itself up to the not-yet-converted reader and maintaining a constant dialogue with important, albeit perhaps seemingly mundane questions. It is also uncompromising, so while it often aims at rather broad synthesis, overall the reader is not left with the feeling that either its broad scope or its accessibility compromise the possibility for nuance or distort the understanding of core political dilemmas.

Many of the tiresome tropes about OWS on the side of the detractors as well as unmeasured celebrators, gravitate around an understanding of it as a diversity fest. Non-hierarchical politics and horizontalist political forms are the essence of OWS. For the detractors, in the most polite formulations, this is a paralyzing lack of programme and perspective. For the enthusiasts this is the ultimate proof of the identity between the form of politics and its goals. The lack of a unifying ideology is now the

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ideology; objective becomes subordinated to the method to the point where it replaces it. Consensus based decision making is not only the instrument of our revolutionary politics, it has become the revolution proper. In what follows I would like to highlight the crucial contribution *Translating Anarchy* makes to unsettling this reading in favor of a much more fruitful account of the limits and possibilities of anarchist politics within OWS.

The analysis the author puts forward is made possible by a fundamental distinction that cuts through the book: that between organizers and participants. The distinction is convincing and carefully followed throughout the volume. The volume thus stands out as an ethnographically informed, rigorous account of the organizing history behind OWS and its' anarchist dimension. The author's ethnographic sensibility is beyond any questioning and the 192 interviews he conducted, broadly covering the organizing space behind OWS' first year as a movement, give visible depth to the writing. It is reassuring to read an account safeguarded by the historian's concern for a rigorous mapping of events and an organizer's insight into the complicated alignments that constitute activist networks. The author's own involvement with the Press Working Group and the Direct Action WG also strengthens the analysis, as it opens up a space for excellent reflection on the constitution of political identities. Far from the all too common navel-gazing presented as auto-ethnography, the reflections about the strategic choices made by activists and the links with the author's own biography are a very insightful terrain for asking essential questions about the articulation of popular education and political practice.

It is this foundation that allows the author to open up reflection on some essential dilemmas of contemporary anarchist politics. Much of the beauty of the book comes from the fact that the author does not only see the elephant in the room, he gives the elephant a name and then tells us its story. I find that much of the reflection about OWS coming from those involved in the movement or sympathetic to it has abandoned a large part of the terrain of criticism to its detractors and has often times even reproduced its terms. *Translating Anarchy* directly confronts it. Some of the most important topics through which it does this are those of the limits of consensus based decision making processes, the role of demands in revolutionary practice and the anarchist tradition, the question of scale and anarchist politics, the question of radical education and processes of building collective power on an everyday basis, and the dialogue between OWS and a broader anarchist tradition.

The question of scale opens a very important problem: that of the possibility of the extreme localism of certain forms of consensus oriented political models to reproduce the systemic inequalities created by capitalism. The author's answer is positively univocal: without opening a space for coordination on a larger scale anarchist political practice cannot confront global inequality. The discussion also goes in the direction of the historical models through which this has been attempted from within the space of anarchist politics: most importantly to the role of the federation as a coordinating structure. While I would have appreciated a deeper discussion of the anarchist tradition's engagement with the problem of scaling up, the author does point towards directions for exploring this crucial question. I find this to be one of the most important discussions in the book, also because it points towards the question of what constitutes a collective subject. Much of the contemporary politics that claims an anarchist origin appears to settle for a very partial understanding of autonomy. As such, attempts to describe a future anarchist society often times resemble a mere conversion of the liberal understanding of the autonomous individual into a model for atomized small scale collectivities the main preoccupation of which is internal democracy. This perhaps would be less worrying if it wouldn't appear to happen at the cost of asking questions about processes of domination, competition and exploitation which occur in a social space in which political collectivities behave as the individual writ large.

I found the discussion about the limits of consensus based decision making equally important and thought provoking, especially in the way it relates to the question of tactics. The pages devoted to what the author calls *liberal libertarianism*, understood as an incarnation of the precedence given to an individualistic notion of free speech over a concept of the collectivity, are truly illuminating. The questions about the negotiation of openness and the reflections about the evolution of the general assemblies within OWS are excellent warnings against the slippery nature of forms of political coordination that can be at once too fluid and too rigid. My experience in Hungary and Romania, and my attention throughout the last years to the way OWS has been claimed as a source of inspiration assigns special weight to this problematic. The pervasiveness of the phenomenon of *liberal libertarianism*, as OWS is oftentimes reduced to a set of traveling procedures in which the ethical basis of the politics has been pushed to the margins, has been more often than not alarming. This is a very basic, unequivocal reality of my experience with consensus oriented politics in the region; the twinkle sign has often times taken precedence over a grounded antifascist

politics. In the name of both openness as well as extremely problematic forms of populism our political forums have been left vulnerable in front of those whose presence at best lacks solidarity and at worst is an open challenge to the ethical foundations of our political activity. The discussion of anarchism's historical involvement with consensus process and the thoughtful exploration of the proposition that our forms of organization should be able to face disruption while allowing space for evolution is an excellent opening up of the broad topic of designing anti-authoritarian decision making structures.

Two other topics seem to me to be essential to the author's account of the anarchist politics behind OWS. These are the questions about the role of demands in revolutionary politics and that of the relationship between our political language and its societal insertion. I find them distinctly important also because they counterpose a strategic analysis to a mainstream interpretation of OWS which sees it as united by "an ideology of the lack of ideologies" and celebrates the language of OWS as the quintessential expression of an anti-capitalist and anarchist one. Such an interpretation has been popularized by one of the most visible spokespersons for OWS, David Graeber. In his latest book, *The Democracy Project* (2013), David Graeber writes on the strategic choice of the language of the 99%:

This is of course precisely what we were getting at when we first decided to call ourselves the 99 percent. In doing so, we did something almost unprecedented. We managed to get the issues not only of class, but of class power, back into the center of American political debate. (pp. xxii-xxiii)

On how OWS compares to other similar movements across the globe and its' revolutionary character:

The Arab revolts included every sort of people, from Marxist trade unionists to conservative theologians, but at their core was a classically liberal demand for a secular, constitutional republic that allowed for free elections and respected human rights. The occupiers in Greece, Spain, Israel were more often than not studiously anti-ideological – though some were more radical than others (anarchists played a particularly central role in Athens, for example). They insisted that they were focusing on very specific issues of corruption and government accountability, and thus appealed to perspectives across the political spectrum. It was in the

United States that we saw a movement kicked off by revolutionaries that began by posing a direct challenge to the very nature of the economic system. (p. 109)

And on the revolutionary character of OWS through its focus on wages/income/money: “The answer to the initial question, then, is that in the United States, challenging the role of money in politics is necessarily revolutionary because bribery has become the organizing principle of public life.” (p. 122).

To an account of OWS that in the good old colonial tradition of anthropology crowns it as the revolution of revolutions, we can oppose that reading made possible by the analysis in *Translating Anarchy*. Mark's Bray analysis of the limits of the political language of OWS serves to strengthen our understanding of its achievements as a movement and to focus our attention on an oft-neglected question, that of the “painstaking work of building collective power on a daily basis” (p. 248). It is here that the book offers the best instruments for meeting criticism of OWS centered around its supposed lack of demands and reformist character. First, on the lack of demands, through an exploration of the diversity of positions which were behind the decision of not formulating a short list of demands, as well as a discussion of his own position towards elaborating a unique set of demands, the author manages to open a crucial debate about the role of demands in revolutionary processes. Although unequivocal about the role of demands in labor politics and about their centrality in anti-governmental politics, he manages to carefully explore the strategic value of the lack of a single set of demands, while he convincingly decenters the “ideology of lack of ideology” interpretation. This is done in favor of a more nuanced analysis which relates discussions about a political program to the attempts to push back OWS into the categories of the political mainstream. Just as importantly, the question of how a unique set of demands would have potentially limited the movement to an essentially reformist framework is explored. The author convincingly suggests that the articulation of demands in one program would have actually stifled the exploration of political alternatives. To a reader in solidarity with OWS but frustrated by the prevalence of interpretations which subordinate its politics to a discourse about the form of decision making (often times perfectly compatible with liberal arguments about diversity understood as individual freedom) this is a breath of fresh air. Finally, the terrain has been given back to a discussion in which anarchist politics has been firmly reestablished on the terrain of political *projects*, doubled

by an understanding that historically the anarchist tradition has had at its center a concern for being affirmative; that its preferred models of organization have to be seen as the expression of a politics concerned with fighting both hierarchy and exploitation.

My excitement with the book probably peaked with the pages devoted to the patient exploration of the political language of OWS. Unlike in the previously mentioned interpretation, the author does full justice to most of the more respectable critique that has been formulated of it. Fully aware of the fact that the income differential emphasis of the 99% rhetoric obscures “the fundamental role of ownership of the means of production, access to productive resources, and labor hierarchy within capitalism” (p.158), he nevertheless manages to patiently restore the merits of the organizers' efforts at engaging the problem of the educational paths of class politics. In this, he successfully moves the discussion to that which should have been its terrain to begin with: not whether the language of Occupy was the highest peak of revolutionary analysis or its deepest bottom, but whether it strategically opened the possibility to insert into the political mainstream an incipient critique of capitalism and the market system—a political mainstream which, as most of those who are so ready to throw around the reactionary diagnosis would immediately notice, can be said to be one of the most adverse to the political language of class struggle. The analysis provides evidence for both failure and success in the space of reasonable potential expectations. Future in-depth exploration of the medium-term changes and the kind of openings in mainstream political language created by OWS would certainly be welcome and could help us evaluate the merits and shortcomings of specific ways of balancing political clarity with the search for popular support. In the meantime, though, Mark Bray's analysis restores merit to the organizational effort behind OWS which the political blindness of its maximalist critiques obscures. This is the merit of taking up “the painstaking work of building collective power on a daily basis” (p. 248), doubled by a concern for strategies of translation of our political language, in the absence of which the concern for returning class politics to a popular basis withers away no matter how many times we have underlined our copy of “*What is to be done?*”.

The book is broader in scope than the previous points might suggest. Over and over again the author shows an impressive capacity for summarizing a central debate of the anarchist tradition in a way that opens it to a fairly broad audience, traces the way the theme was reflected in OWS and affirms a personal choice and selection of tactics within the horizon of revolutionary anarchism. This holds true for the

discussion on anarchism's historical engagement with the question of violence and the tensions surrounding the definition of violence within OWS, as well as for the part of the book devoted to the problem of diversity of tactics.

While I suspect many readers will find the first chapter to be the most interesting of the book, given the ambitious attempt at synthesis and its historical scope, I have found it to be the only one where the writing made me slightly anxious about the relationship between the ethnographic level and the broader theoretical claims. Perhaps having to do with my academic background in sociology and anthropology I found the discussion about journalism's entanglements with capitalism and market ideology to be too ambitious. A reader with a special interest in the topic will probably find the discussion too prone to generalization and lacking historical depth. But that is most likely less relevant than the fact that the chapter speaks to the kind of courage required for opening up a space for incipient critique. The level of generality might perhaps be instrumental in addressing an audience less accustomed to the constant scrutiny of mediatic representations, and that it seems to me would be more aligned with the objectives of the book than a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between market ideology and journalism's historical entanglements with it (which is hard to believe could have been achieved within the confines of the book). Another aspect which I thought would have added to the analysis would have been a more systematic treatment of the questions about the social base of OWS. This of course is also, for obvious reasons, a task on its own and not an easy one, given the kind of data such an analysis would have to rely on; it is in many ways, perhaps most, outside the scope of the book. But a section devoted to the author's observations about the social base of OWS as reflected among the participants could have complemented the pages about the question of racial issues within the movement.

All in all, *Translating Anarchy* is an essential political contribution to the conversation about the space of alternatives reflected in OWS and genuinely seems to set a new standard for most of the conversation about OWS. It debunks, with admirable patience, the pseudo-radical leftist mantra about the reactionary nature of OWS. It confronts, with equal insight, the points at which anarchists failed to take full advantage of the political space of OWS. The criticism is not a mere reflex of the spectacle of criticism, but proof of the fact that systematic reflection on the achievements and limits of the movements we stand in solidarity with can in itself be a radical, transformative intervention.

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