Occupy as a Vanguard Communist Movement

By Gary Zabel

Occupy's Ideological Populism

Most people with an interest in political classification have identified Occupy as a populist movement, more precisely, a populist movement of the left.[1] Populism differs from Marxism and other forms of socialism in that it does not proceed on the basis of a class analysis. For populists, the primary division within society is not that between capitalists and workers, but rather between the "people" and the forces that work toward their undoing. Specification of what these forces are distinguishes left- from right-wing populism, and also results in differing conceptions of who "the people" are.

Right-wing populists identify the enemy of the people as bankers, politicians, lawyers, immigrants, racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, godless intellectuals, socialists, communists, "elitist liberals," or some subset of these social categories. The people are more or less restrictively defined depending upon which members of this expansive enemies list a right-wing populist movement decides to adopt. From this perspective, the people may consist in the whole or any subset of farmers, small businessmen, honest workers, native-born citizens, white people, Aryans, heterosexuals, god-fearing Christians, anti-communists, anti-socialists, and conservatives. Left-wing populists are more sparing in their enemies list, as well as in their conception of the people. They identify the enemy as bankers, corporate fat cats, the rich, and the politicians in their employ, and the people as farmers, workers, small business owners, and perhaps some professionals.

The two forms of populism sometimes share common enemies, including bankers and politicians, as well as a core conception of the people as including farmers, workers, and small business owners, though, for right-wing populism, the people must also must possess the proper racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, and/or ideological characteristics. Historically, this commonality can smooth the way for a slide of left- into right-wing populism, as happened, for example, when the People's Party in the 19th century United States came to exclude African Americans from its definition of the people. In an analogous way, Mussolini's fascist populism was able to attract erstwhile socialists and anarchists to its ranks. Unfortunately the reverse conversion of right- into left-wing populism is much harder to come by, operating at the level of individuals, rather than parties or mass movements.

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[1] See Joe Lowndes and Dorian Warren, 'Occupy Wall Street: A Twenty-First Century Populist Movement?', in *Dissent* (online), October 21, 2011.

In the populist imagination, left and right, the people are inevitably hardworking, goodhearted, and generous, devoted to their families, civically minded and always willing to lend a helping hand to any of their number who has fallen on hard times. They are a little naïve, however, a little slow on the uptake, unaware of the machinations of the enemy, because those machinations are so foreign to their own way of life. Frank Capra's films, cinematic responses to the Great Depression of the 1930s and 40s, capture these aspects of the American version of populism, in an essentially left-wing form.

In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), Jimmy Stewart plays the role of Mr. Smith, a leader of the Boy Rangers, selected as a dupe by the corrupt governor of his state to fill a vacant seat in the U.S. Senate. When the equally corrupt senior senator from his state encourages him to sponsor a legislative initiative to create a national Boy's Camp, Smith throws himself enthusiastically into the project, unaware that it is part of a scheme to build a dam in his home state that, like many such construction projects, is rife with opportunities for graft. Set up to take the fall for the Boy's Camp scheme, Smith starts a filibuster on the Senate floor, but is exonerated only when the corrupt senior senator has a moral conversion, and confesses to the Senate that Smith was a dupe. In the movie, Capra contrasts Smith's civic commitment and generosity with the greed and self-serving duplicity of the enemy, represented by the corrupt politician, the governor of his home state.

In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), Gary Cooper plays Longfellow Deeds, a tuba-player and greeting card poet in rural Vermont who inherits $20,000,000 from his uncle's estate. In this case, it's the uncle's lawyer who assumes the role of the enemy of the people, in his attempt to swindle Deeds out of his fortune. He takes Deeds to New York City, where he becomes the target of a reporter, played by Jean Arthur, who convinces him that she is a struggling working-class woman. When Deeds discovers the deception, he becomes jaded and distraught, and decides to return to Vermont. His retreat is interrupted, however, when a poor farmer bursts in on him and threatens him with a gun, accusing him of being one of the self-serving rich. Awakened by the destitute farmer, he decides to use the $20,000,000 to provide thousand of farmers, dispossessed by the Great Depression, with 10-acre farms and farming machinery, in exchange for their commitment to work the farms for several years. When the scheming attorney attempts to foil the project with a mental competency hearing, Deeds is saved when Jean Arthur's confession of love inspires him to defend himself vigorously in court.

I won't bother to recount the plot of *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), since the film is aired multiple times every Christmas season. It's enough to consider the final scene of the film, where Georg Bailey (played again by Jimmy Stewart) is saved from the attempt of

a corrupt landlord to frame him for bank fraud. The landlord has arranged this fate because the building and loan company Bailey runs has created an affordable housing project that enables the landlord's rent-gouged tenants to leave his buildings. In the final scene of the film, Bailey's friends and neighbors respond to his past acts of populist generosity by giving him the money he needs to avoid disaster.

Capra thus gives us three figures of the enemy of the people: the corrupt politician, the scheming lawyer, and the gouging landlord. Common to all three is their greed, as well as their self-serving duplicity. Other than what they appear to be, they seek to undo the hero by scheming, by operating in the shadows. By contrast, the hero is an always an unassuming, essentially selfless person, a Boy Rangers' master, a tuba-playing greeting card writer, the financially strapped manager of a building and loan company. Each is inspired to serve the needs of the people, especially the poor, by creating a redistributive public resource: a national Boy's Camp; a grant of land and equipment to impoverished farmers; a low-cost housing development. Finally, each overcomes the machinations of the enemy only when he loses his naivety in recognizing the enemy's perfidy, and at the same time gains the support of a member of the opposition who has undergone a conversion, or of the masses of the people themselves.

It is easy to see how Occupy fits into the category of left-wing populism. The people here go under the title of the 99 per cent. The enemy of the people, the 1 per cent, is a catchall category that includes bankers, corporate fat cats, politicians, and the rich in general. The 99 percent is by no means identical to the working class. Based on the criterion of ownership of wealth, it includes relatively affluent doctors, middle managers, some small business owners, and (contra Capra) even a good number of lawyers, as well as workers properly so-called, i.e. those who can survive only by selling their work for a wage.

Ideologically, Occupy is remarkably close to Capra's films. Once again, the people are basically hardworking (when they can find work), civically inclined, and goodhearted. But they have been the victims of their failure to grasp the moral turpitude, the greed and duplicity, of the forces arrayed against them. However, on the verge of their undoing, the truth has dawned on them, and they are now in a position to wage a struggle against the enemy, with the help of one another. The reason for this parallelism is clear. Capra's movies followed in the wake of the Great Depression, while the Occupy movement has arisen in the wake of the financial collapse of 2007. The transfer of nearly one trillion dollars to the largest and most powerful banks and investment companies, without any strings attached, has brought the enemy of the people squarely into the light once again.

The interpretation of the Occupy movement as a form of left-wing populism certainly captures the character of its ideology; the discourse it addresses to the public, and through which it understands its politics. Consider Occupy's focus on the "greed" of the

big bankers and investment company CEOs, which shines a spotlight on a supposed moral failing, rather than on a flawed systemic structure and the roles it creates. However, we must be a careful to draw a distinction in this case, as in others, between ideology and the real practice it both expresses and distorts.

In so doing, we need to answer a preliminary question. Why has the Occupy movement been so attached to its camps? This attachment has become obvious in the wake of the police destruction of the camps in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Oakland, and other important cities. The movement seems adrift without the camps, at least for the moment. Most occupiers seem uncomfortable with becoming a political party, focusing exclusively on single issues (such as work against home evictions or labor union support), or becoming an educational or propaganda group. Nostalgia for the camps, foiled attempts to recreate them (as on land owned by Trinity Church in New York City), and plans to revive them in the spring have been an important part of the Occupy scene since the evictions. But why? After all, the camps had their problems. They were indeed becoming dirty, disheveled, and potentially unhealthy, as various mayors claimed, though this was largely the result of police blockades ordered by those very mayors. Some of the campers abused drugs and alcohol, in spite of attempts by the General Assemblies to prevent this. There were serious problems with safety, including nighttime assaults, sexual molestations, and rapes, nearly all of them involving perpetrators from outside the camps, but nonetheless harrowing for that reason. Most of the camps had to grapple with the misery of mud and rain, and, in Boston, New York, and other northern cities, the even more intense misery of a winter fast approaching. Finally, of course, there were the inevitable internal squabbles and dissensions, especially under such stressful conditions, and in anticipation of police evictions. So how do we account for the persistent allure of the camps?

We can answer this question only by suspending focus on Occupy's populist ideology, while examining the real practice that caught the imagination of its activists and supporters. In order to accomplish this task, it is necessary to appeal to the language, not of populism, but of the communist tradition. Normally that tradition is conceived as beginning in the 19th century with the work of Marx and Engels, achieving canonical formulation in the writings and politics of Lenin, and finally ending with the collapse of the regimes of the East Bloc from 1989 to 1991. The main point that I want to make in this essay is that the communist tradition is crucially relevant to understanding the Occupy movement, provided we have an adequate conception of that tradition's true history and reach, which are far more extensive than that of what used to be called "the actually existing socialist states." I hope to have justified the provocative title of the essay by its end.

Occupy's Vanguardism

The first word in the communist lexicon that we need to appeal to is “vanguard.” The Occupy camps constituted a vanguard formation. At its etymological origin, the word “vanguard” (as well as its French translation, *avant-garde*) belongs to the theory of war. It refers to the detachments an army deploys in enemy territory in advance of its main forces. These forward detachments are exposed to the danger of attack, while they reconnoiter unknown territory, and perhaps launch military operations designed to weaken the enemy, or draw him into the open, where he becomes vulnerable. By way of metaphorical extension, utopian socialists, anarchists, and revolutionary Marxists gave the word “vanguard” a political meaning in the nineteenth century. Utopian socialists and anarchists rather than revolutionary Marxists were the semantic pioneers here. Among the utopian socialists, Saint-Simonians especially referred to themselves as members of an avant-garde as early as the first decades of the nineteenth century. The Russian “anarchist prince,” Piotr Kropotkin, who argued in his many writings for the establishment of a libertarian communist society, launched the revolutionary newspaper, *L’avant-garde,* in 1871. It was not until 1902 in *What Is To Be Done?,* that Lenin gave the word avant-garde, or vanguard, a solid place in the Marxist lexicon.

Utopian socialist, anarchist, and Leninist conceptions of the vanguard differed from one another in important ways. For the Saint-Simonians, the vanguard consisted in the artists, engineers, scientists, and industrialists who were given the task of bringing the new society into existence and shepherding its development. Anarchists normally used the word “vanguard” to refer to all revolutionary anarchist militants, though they also sometimes used it more specifically for clandestine groups of such militants. The semi-secret Alliance for Social Democracy, created by the anarchist leader, Mikhail Baukunin, in his rivalry with Marx for control of the International Workingmen’s Association, was one such vanguard formation. Lenin’s innovation, of course, was to use the word “vanguard” for a new kind of revolutionary political party. Lenin argued that, under the repressive and autocratic political system of Russian Tsarism, the open organization of a Marxist parliamentary party, such as the Social Democratic Party of Germany, was a prescription for defeat. Russian revolutionaries had to operate on a more “conspiratorial” and tightly knit organizational basis. The Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (which would later rename itself the Russian Communist Party) must gather together the most highly developed intellectuals and working-class cadres, professional revolutionaries who would subject themselves to the collective discipline necessary to lead a revolution under the watchful eyes of the Tsarist secret police.

In spite of these differences, the utopian socialist, anarchist, and Leninist traditions share metaphorical common ground. The military conception of a vanguard is spatial in character, in that vanguard detachments occupy the most forward positions on the battlefield. By contrast, the utopian socialist, anarchist, and Leninist conceptions of a vanguard are conceived in temporal rather than spatial terms. The vanguard consists in

those forces who advance, so to speak, into the future of society, both anticipating and making possible, through their actions, the new world that is on the verge of being born. In the case of the anarchist and Leninist traditions, though not that of utopian socialism, the advance into a new society requires a revolutionary break with the past in the specific form of a defeat of the existing state. For the anarchists, this defeat immediately inaugurates a stateless society, while the Leninists conceive of it as a prelude to the creation of a state of a fundamentally new kind, a state in the gradual but inexorable process of withering away.

The interesting thing about the Occupy camps is that they combined the temporal conception of the vanguard as an advance into the future with the original military conception of the vanguard as a forward spatial deployment. In spite of the Occupier's embrace of nonviolence, who could miss the fact that the "camps" (also a military metaphor) were deployments of soldiers in the heart of enemy territory? As in any such deployment, the soldiers ran risks of assault (in this case, by thugs or police), exposure to the weather, the physical discomfort of living in the field, and even death from serious injury. This is at least part of the reason why a good number of war veterans took part in the occupations, and why in many cases they were the most militant occupiers, insisting on a defense of the camps to the point of arrest when mayors ordered their dismantlement. Danton once gave a famous formulation of the stance required of the revolutionary in the face of the enemy: *de l'audace, encore de l'audace, et toujours de l'audace*. What he did not say is that audacity is required, not only for strategic and tactical reasons, but also for the inspiration of one's own troops and supporters. The sheer audacity of the camps in taking the fight to the heart of Wall Street, the financial district in Boston, and so on, generated a sense of possibility and excitement that helps account for the enormous impact of what were, after all, no more than a few hundred Occupiers at even the largest encampments.

Occupy's version of military engagement is, of course, nonviolent direct action. Direct action tents were meant to play the role of command headquarters (in a "horizontal," coordinating sense), and affinity groups to serve as basic infantry units. Truth be told, direct action was more myth than reality, and, when it did occur, was usually a spontaneous response to changing circumstances, rather than the outcome of any strategic plan. Still that myth was important, especially since it inspired young people who wanted to act, at some risk to themselves, rather than merely talk. The dangers of privileging action over thought are obvious; the *squadristi* and storm troopers of European fascism were adherents of a cult of pure action. But we also need to recognize the opposite error of privileging thought over action, which usually results in the academic isolation of thought. Under the right circumstances, action can initiate a political process that opens a space for genuine thinking. The initial seizure of Zuccotti Park is a good example. By commandeering this semi-public space for nearly two months, the direct actionists started a debate that was not possible before that audacity, and that has now gripped the whole of society. (As I write this, right-wing Republican

Party presidential candidates are attacking the frontrunner, Mitt Romney, as a predatory, "vulture" capitalist, a sure example of Occupy's impact even among the organized political wing of the enemy[2]). It is also the case that action can release a dynamic that was salient in the campus uprisings of the sixties, and revived by the Egyptian militants in Tahrir Square. When the police respond to nonviolent direct action with brutality, it can have a radicalizing effect on large numbers of people previously neutral or limited to a sympathetic but passive role. A couple of examples come to mind: the general strike in Oakland in the aftermath of the police violence in that city, as well as the (nonviolent) rage of 30,000 people in lower Manhattan following the seizure of Zuccotti Park and the destruction of its tent city by the New York City police.

Forward deployment in enemy territory in the name of a different, more egalitarian, future, the audacity of young militants, the myth (sometimes realized) of direct action, and the violent response of the enemy all demonstrate beyond any doubt the vanguard character of the Occupy movement, and, more specifically, locate it within the vanguardist tradition of the socialist and communist left. Of course, Occupy's vanguardism is not that of Kroptkin and Baukunin, Lenin, or Saint Simon, though it does incorporate these orientations into a position that nevertheless transcends them. Like Kropotkin and Bakunin, Occupy rejects "authoritarian" forms of organization, emphasizing instead, in its General Assemblies, an anarchist style of "horizontal" decision-making. Its direct action tents preserved something of Lenin's emphasis on tightly knit "conspiratorial" organization, while rejecting the form of the vanguard party. And, in its idea of the encampment as an anticipation of the future, Occupy preserved the Saint-Simonian emphasis on realizing the new society in the heart of the old, but without any role for an elite of scientists, industrialists, artists, engineers, or any other "advanced" segment of society.

Hegel characterized dialectical development as a transcendence that preserves, in superseded form, the very positions it transcends. For Occupy, as indeed in much of Hegel's work, dialectical preservation-in-transcendence is not located on the level of consciousness. With the possible exception of the anarchist influence, Occupy's founders were not operating with vanguardism in mind. What we have here instead is an independent and organic development that unconsciously repeats the classical history of the communist left in the act of inventing a new form suited to the very different conditions of the early twenty-first century. If the idea that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, a prototypical dialectical concept, is an outmoded notion in biology, it nevertheless retains some truth for this birth of a new kind of egalitarian politics.

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[2] Gabriel and Confessore, 'PAC Ads to Attack Romney as Predatory Capitalist', *New York Times*, January 8, 2012.

Occupy's Communism

The second word in the lexicon of the communist tradition that we need to apply to the Occupy movement is "communism" itself. Revival of intellectual interest in the idea of communism precedes the origins of the Occupy movement by a few years. In March 13-15, 2007, the philosophers, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek, sponsored a conference titled, *The Idea of Communism*, at the Birbeck Institute for the Humanities in London. The conference had to be relocated to a large lecture hall when, to the surprise of the organizers, approximately one thousand participants showed up, most of them young people. Verso has played a major role in extending the conversation initiated by the conference through publishing its proceedings under the title, *The Idea of Communism*,[3] as well as by releasing, in its new Pocket Communism series, philosophy books, all bound in red cover, about the meaning of communism in the current period.[4]

This revival of intellectual interest in the idea of communism has so far been quite independent of the Occupy movement. Yet the two are bound together by common historical circumstances. Both have derived their energy from the financial collapse of 2007, the ensuing massive redistribution of wealth from the poor, working class, and middle strata to the financial elite, and the Great Recession that ended notionally in 2009, but that has in fact continued, and in some ways deepened, until the present day. These are the inescapably concrete realities that ushered in the end of "the end of history." The long period of triumphant reaction that extends from the late 1970s to 2007, and whose dramatic center is the collapse of the East Bloc regimes in 1989-1991, is now behind us, and the project of an egalitarian politics is once again a living possibility. Mass movements devoted to realizing such politics are important parts of the contemporary global scene, including the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and Libya, the rise of the *indignados* in Spain, the student rebellion in the UK, the massive and continuing Greek uprising against Euro-austerity, mobilization against electoral fraud in Russia and political corruption in India, and the beginning of successful mass rebellions against the transfer of wealth in China from workers and peasants to a new capitalist class, no less predatory for being sponsored by what still calls itself the Chinese Communist Party.

Varied voices have been raised in the discussion of communism that stems from the London conference, but they seem to concur in regarding communism as neither an idea that has been invalidated by the collapse of the "actually existing socialist" regimes, nor a Platonic form that floats above the twentieth-century history of attempts to translate it into reality. The attempt to bring a social and political idea to concrete existence is not like a crucial experiment in naively falsificationist theories of the natural sciences, where experimental failure is capable of refuting a theory (after Kuhn, Lakatos, and Feyerabend, we know that there are no such crucial experiments in the

[3] Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Zizek editors, *The Idea of Communism*, London, Verso, 2010.
[4] Including Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, London, Verso, 2010; Bruno Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism*, London, Verso, 2011; and Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, London, Verso, 2009.

natural sciences either).[5] Attempts at historical realization are complex processes, rife with critical points at which those involved may take the wrong turn, resulting in outcomes very different than the one envisioned at the outset. The arrival at a different, even a disastrously different outcome, does not refute the idea; it simply demonstrates, to those who remain committed and attentive, which critical turning points must be negotiated in a different way in the future.

In order to make my claim that Occupy is a communist movement plausible, it is necessary to examine the rather extensive range that any meaningful idea of communism in the current period must have. In other words, as I have already suggested, we must not limit the idea of communism to the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. As Marx, Engels, and Louis Henry Morgan were to point out in their writings on anthropology, communism is a social and economic practice that reaches into the depths of human prehistory.[6] In contemporary anthropology, "primitive communism" generally goes under the title of a "gift economy" in which "generalized reciprocity" is practiced, i.e. a form of distributing the wealth created by society, and so satisfying the needs of its members, in a way unconstrained by the *quid pro quo* of market exchange. In market exchange, I give to you something in my possession only in return for something you possess that is of equivalent value. In a gift economy, a member of a family, band, or tribe gives surplus goods to others in the relevant community without demanding an equivalent value, but with the understanding that others will behave similarly when they possess a surplus. For example, a hunter who kills a large game animal may host a feast for members of his entire band, and not only those of his family. But he does this with the expectation that the other hunters in the band will host similar feasts when they kill large game animals. In this way, the band organizes the mutual satisfaction of the needs of its members without the market exchange of equivalents. Before their social traditions disintegrated under the impact of Western colonialism, the "Bushmen" of the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa were a famous, though far from the only example of the practice of generalized reciprocity in a gift economy.[7] Although modern anthropology resists the urge to project the practices of recent hunter-gatherer societies into human prehistory, it is difficult to imagine Paleolithic hunter-gatherer tribes surviving in the harsh environment of Ice Age Europe, for example, without practicing some form of generalized reciprocity. Otherwise, whenever an individual or family failed to get food in the hunt, it would have run the risk of perishing, and soon the entire species would have become extinct. Some form of primitive communism appears to be, not a speculative reconstruction, but a species necessity under conditions of a slim and unreliable surplus.

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[5] See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1962; Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978; and Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1970.

[6] See Karl Marx, *Precapitalist Economic Formations*, in *Grundrisse*, Notebook IV, Martin Nicolaus translator, London, Penguin, 1973; Friedrick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, London, Penguin Books, 2010; and Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1907.

[7] See John E, Yellen, 'The Transformation of the Kalahari !Kung,' in Scientific American, April 1990.

Generalized reciprocity persists even in a fully developed capitalist society. The Chicago School economist, Milton Freedman, is said to have given his children a choice of staying in a fancy hotel room when the family travelled, or staying in a cheap hotel room while pocketing the difference in cost between the two. But this attempt to encourage sovereign free-market choice cannot hide the fact that, by supplying some kind of hotel room, Freedman was giving a resource to his children without expecting equivalent value from them. If families did not live under some form of generalized reciprocity, then children would never survive to the age when it becomes possible for them to work, and parents would die as soon as they became incapable of paying their way any longer. Even the most radical free-market libertarian is the beneficiary of the primitive communism of the family, without which his or her survival to adulthood would have been impossible.

Even when exploitative social forms have taken the place of "primitive communism" on a large scale, even when societies based on the exploitation of slaves, or serfs, or wage workers became the norm in human history, communist forms have persisted, either as survivals of the past, or as images of a new society, sometimes in the form of millennial dreams of "a new heaven and a new earth." As Ernst Bloch pointed out, the tribes of Israel practiced a kind of nomadic communism, a desert-based generalized reciprocity, before they settled in the land of Canaan.[8] Even when settlement brought them under conditions permitting the accumulation of private property in land, the Jews preserved a remnant of their nomadic communist past in the year of Jubilee. At the end of seven cycles of Sabbatical Years, each of which consisted in seven years (for a total forty-nine year cycle), a blast on the ram's horn trumpet, the shofar, announced the Jubilee Year in which slaves were freed, debts forgiven, and property returned to its original owners. The ancient communism of the Jews echoes in the New Testament as Jesus drives the money changers out of the temple, associates with impoverished peasants, thieves, and prostitutes, and says that it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye then for a wealthy person to enter heaven. In the Acts of the Apostles (4:34-7), the early church builds on the Master's legacy when those who join the Christian community sell their houses and land and place the money they receive at the feet of the apostles, who distribute it to those who need it. According to Acts 2:44-5: "All that believed were together, and had all things in common, and parted them to all men as every man had need." (Distribution in accordance with need is precisely the principal that Marx invokes in 1875 in his *Critique of the Gotha Program* as a distinguishing feature of the higher phase of communism, made possible when the productive forces expand and "all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly"[9]). Even after the Church made its peace with Rome, acquiring enormous wealth and power in the process, the communism described in Acts reappeared down through the ages in sects of Waldensians, Taborites, Anabaptists, and Shakers.

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[8] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope, Volume Three*, Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, translators, The MIT Press, 1986, p. 1233.

[9] Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, New York, International Publishers, 1966, page 10.

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the new capitalist system was beginning in what Marx called the period of "original accumulation of capital."[10] The great voyages of discovery, launched by Spain and Portugal and backed by Italian banking capital, made possible the conquest of the Americas and the extraction of its material wealth, while the wealth of human labor was forcibly extracted from Africa in the form of the transatlantic slave trade. At the same time, in the European heartland of this global expansion, poor peasants were losing their livelihood through the enclosure of the common land by lords seeking to enrich themselves from the new international market for wool. The common land, available to the use of poor peasants, was a survival in feudal Europe of older, tribal practices of generalized reciprocity. It was the enclosure, the privatization, of the commons that uprooted the poor population from the soil, sending them into the cities, where their descendants became the first recruits to the industrial workforce of the 18th and 19th centuries, the first levy of the new industrial proletariat, who were forced to work for the owners of capital because they lacked productive property. As this enclosure process was beginning, the Roman Catholic martyr, Thomas More, revived the idea of communism in his description of a fictional society, most likely located somewhere in the Americas, characterized by the collective ownership of property. More called this society "Utopia," also the title of the book, and clearly wrote it as a kind of critique by counterexample of the enclosures taking place in Europe. In the opening pages of the work, he refers to enclosure of the common land in a vivid image: in the countryside of England, the sheep "eat up and swallow down the very men themselves."[11]

If More's *Utopia* can be read as the first communist critique of capitalism in literary form, the Digger movement of 17th century England is the first enactment of such a critique in practice. In the early 1640s, shortly after Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army defeated King Charles I in the English Civil War, a ruined trader and impoverished laborer, Gerrard Winstanley, led landless peasants in an occupation of waste and common land, first at Saint George's Hill in Walton on Thames, and then at Cobham Heath. Winstanley was on what we would call the far left of the English revolutionary movement, though "the left" is a secular term that would not come into use until the French Revolution more than a century later, and the language of politics at the time was religious in character. Nevertheless, it makes sense to say that the Levelers, mostly lower level army officers, had emerged as the main force on the English left with their demand that the property qualification for voting be abolished (also one of the distinguishing positions of the left, properly so-called, in the revolutionary French National Assembly). But Winstanley outflanked even the Levelers by arguing that universal manhood suffrage would remain an empty achievement as long as the poor had no independent means of livelihood. In a series of pamphlets, he and some of his followers developed this argument in the context of a revival of the Christian communist tradition, but now in opposition to the enclosure of the commons that marked the initial phase of the new capitalist system.

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[10] See Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, Ben Fowkes, translator, London, Penguin Books, 1976, pages 873-896.

[11] Thomas More, *Utopia*, Ralph Robynson translator, New York, Heritage Press, 1935, page 26.

In *The True Levelers Standard Advanced*, Winstanley articulated what would remain the most developed theory of communism until the 18th century Enlightenment. There he told his readers that, in the beginning, the earth was made by the Creator to serve as a "common treasury" for humans and animals, and that, although dominion was given to man over beasts, God had not given one branch of humankind dominion over another. The condition of humankind is radically egalitarian at its origins, and that includes equality of access to the bounty of nature. It is only when the "flesh" begins to delight more in material things than in "Spirit, Reason, and Righteousness," that one branch of humankind is set above another, and most people brought into bondage. Acting in accordance with the covetousness of the flesh, those who wield the "Sword" enclose the common treasury of nature, making it their private property. Private property is therefore a violent creation of rulers, and of the priests and other "teachers" in their employ. It's worth quoting a brief passage from the *True Levelers Standard Advance*d in order to experience something of the power of Winstanley's prose:

> And hereupon, The Earth (which was made to be a Common Treasury of relief for all, both Beasts and Men) was hedged in to In-closures by the teachers and rulers, and the others were made Servants and Slaves: And that Earth that is within this Creation made a Common Store-house for all, is bought and sold, and kept in the hands of a few, whereby the great Creator is mightily dishonoured, as if he were a respector of persons, delighting in the comfortable Livelihoods of some, and rejoycing in the miserable povertie and straits of others. From the beginning it was not so.[12]

Winstanley goes on to link this primordial enclosure of the commons, which is the origin of private property, to the contemporary enclosure of the common land by the lords of England. This leads to a political thesis as well as a strategy. The thesis is:

> England is not a Free People until the Poor that have no Land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the Commons, and so live as Comfortably as the Landlords that live in their Inclosures.[13]

The strategy is to occupy the commons through nonviolent direct action, by establishing agrarian communist communities:

> The Work we are going about is this, To dig up Georges-Hill and the waste Ground thereabouts, and to Sow Corn, and to eat our bread together by the sweat of our brows.[14]

The now obvious problem with this strategy is that it does not answer the question of what to do about the "Sword," namely, the organized repressive violence of the ruling

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[12] Gerrard Winstanley, *The True Levelers Standard Advanced*, in Gerrard Winstanley, Selected Writings, Andrew Hopton editor, London, Aporia Press, 1989, page 10.
[13] Ibid, page 17.
[14] Ibid, page 15.

class and its minions. The occupations of George's Hill and Cobham Heath never had a chance. The occupiers were beaten by sheriffs' men, arrested, and evicted from the common land, in an anticipation of the recent history of the Occupy movement.

Although Christian communism developed in various sectarian communities after the Diggers were defeated, including that of the Shakers, who had a place in the religious panoply of the 19th century United States, the next important revival of the communist theme occurred in secular rather than religious form. Speculation on the idea of a utopian communism in relation to the problem of social and economic inequality was a common topic in the 18th century French Enlightenment, especially in the meditations of Rousseau, Morelly, Mably, Fenelon, Prevost, and Restif de la Brentonne. But it was not until the thread was taken up by an obscure rural notary, Francois-Noel Babeuf, that the idea of communism was linked to an insurrectionary political project, inaugurating a tradition that would find its decisive formulation in the writings of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci, and Mao, and the 19th and 20th century communist movements in which they were the key actors.

Though he came from an impoverished family, and worked as a laborer in his adolescence, Babeuf was able, by early adulthood, to establish a career as a *feudiste*, a notary specializing in the law regarding administration of feudal estates.[15] Employed by nobles who hoped to rationalize and augment the income from their holdings, Babeuf came to experience at first hand the humiliating hierarchy that condemned, not only the peasantry, but also Babeuf himself, to social inferiority. Under these conditions, he developed a passion for the idea of equality, sharpened by his reading in 1787 of the summary of a prospectus for an eight-volume work by the minor utopian pamphleteer, Claude-Boniface Collignon. The prospectus outlined a project for replacing feudalism with a society in which productive resources were collectively owned, and in which all citizens would receive food, clothing, housing, heat, lighting, and education free of charge. From that point on, Babeuf's egalitarianism became linked with the communist idea, which he continued to develop in his writings. Like Winstanley, of whose existence he was unaware, Babeuf accounted for the origins of inequality in the use of violence by the future ruling class in bringing collectively owned land into private appropriation. Once again, it was the Sword that established what Babeuf called, "the revolting distinctions in all orders of society."

By changing his first name to Gracchus, Babeuf publicly proclaimed his radical egalitarianism. Gracchus was the family name of the two famous brothers of the late Roman Republic, one of whom was elected Tribune of the People, who championed an "agrarian law" that would redistribute land from the Roman aristocracy to the impoverished peasantry and urban poor, and who were assassinated for their efforts by thugs in aristocratic employ. Babeuf himself became one of the champions of a contemporary version of the agrarian law during the early years of the French Revolution, a law so threatening to the hierarchical social order that even the revolutionary National Assembly made its advocacy a capital crime. Nonetheless,

[15] See R.B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf, The First Revolutionary Communist*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1978.

Babeuf was able to get a job in Paris with the national government when the left-wing Jacobin Club triumphed over their political rivals, the centrist Gironde. However he soon broke with the Jacobins in a dramatic dispute with the famous Jean-Paul Marat, moving resolutely to their left on the question of democracy. The Jacobins had established a revolutionary dictatorship that ended by destroying the direct democracy practiced in the 48 municipal “sections” of Paris, and that Babeuf believed was a necessary condition of genuine equality. When their enemies deposed the Jacobins in a coup in 9 thermidor (July 27, 1794), Babeuf mistakenly thought that this might be the prelude to the restoration of direct democracy. In fact it was a much different and more complicated phenomenon, an essentially reactionary coup, though one led by moderates as well as erstwhile Jacobins fearful of going down with the regime.

The reactionary character of Thermidor, the epoch in the French Revolution named for the month of the coup, soon became clear to Babeuf. By 1795 he had become involved in an underground movement of radical republicans preparing an insurrection against the Thermidorian regime, a movement that included both traditional Jacobins as well as a communist left arguing for a community of goods and labor. Babeuf soon became a leader of the communist left, as well as the seven-person “Insurrectional Committee” that was to lead the uprising, and that was dominated by the communists.

The Committee planned the uprising in meticulous detail, and conducted the careful recruitment and organization of revolutionary forces, especially by agitating in the army and enlisting disgruntled troops in the revolutionary combat division. It also prepared a program for the post-revolutionary transition to a communist society, projecting a political regime that would consist in an elected National Assembly, with a strong infusion of direct democracy. The latter was to consist in popular referenda and primary assemblies where citizens would be able to launch their own initiatives, and even suspend the National Assembly should it fall into serious discord with the will of the people. As far as the economy was concerned, productive resources were to be brought into common ownership, and production administered by representatives elected by the trades and professions. Each “commune” (municipality) would elect representatives who would administer its public warehouses, and organize and record the distribution of goods from them. Local administration of production and consumption was to be subject to the authority of a higher administration at national level, responsible for foreign trade, as well as balancing production and distribution between the various regions. In exchange for their labor, every citizen was to be guaranteed food, clothing, housing, heat, lighting, medical care, and education. The young, old, and disabled would be entitled to an equal share in this distribution.

We don’t know what would have happened had the insurrection actually been launched. It might have succeeded, at least in deposing the Thermidorian regime. Instead it was betrayed by one its military men who informed the authorities, who in turn arrested the leadership, including Babeuf, on May 10, 1796. Babeuf spent a year in prison, where he reflected on the problems of the insurrection, the missed opportunities and security measures that might have permitted it to succeed. After a year, he and the other leaders of the “Conspiracy of Equals” were tried and convicted of the crime of conspiracy,

though all but Babeuf and Augustine Darthe escaped capital sentencing because of "mitigating circumstances." On May 26, 1797, the jury returned with its verdict, and in a courtroom filled with the public, Babeuf and Darthe were given the death sentence. In a final act of protest, the two men stabbed themselves publically, but failed to do so fatally, only creating nonlethal wounds. After a day of physical agony, Babeuf and Darthe were executed. Baubeuf faced his fate with dignity and composure, thereby becoming the first martyr of revolutionary communism.

The political descendants of Babeuf constituted a part of the communist milieu that Marx first encountered in the coffee houses of Paris in 1844, and under whose influence became a communist himself. They also helped shape the conception of proletarian revolution that Marx introduced in the *Communist Manifesto*, published with Engels in1848, on the verge of an actual revolution that swept 50 countries, and that had Paris as its epicenter. There are only two other historical periods characterized by such a global uprising: the international revolutionary ferment associated with the year 1968, and the period inaugurated by the Arab Spring in 2011, of which the Occupy movement is an expression.

No discussion of communism prior to the Russian Revolution would be even partially satisfying without considering the Paris Commune of 1871.[16] Though it served as the topic of two founding works that inspired the revolutionary communism of the 20th century – Marx's *Class Struggles in France* and Lenin's *State and Revolution* – the Commune was in fact an expression of a communist idea very different than that of Russian Revolution and its sequel. The historical context was the end of the Second Empire in France after defeat in a war with Prussia; an uprising in Paris that installed the Republic in place of the Empire; a betrayal of French national interests to the Prussians by the conservative leadership of the Republic, more afraid of the French working class than foreign domination; a defeat of this betrayal by Parisian women, who called into action workers and artisans organized in armed detachments of the National Guard; retreat of the National Government to Versailles; and the exercise of political power by workers and artisans through a radical transformation of the Commune, the municipal government of Paris. The French working class succeeded in governing Paris for a period of ten weeks, during which the National Government was able to regain the initiative, encircle and invade Paris with the support of the Prussians, and execute, without trial, 20,000 communards in a period of one week.

The 93 representatives elected by universal suffrage to the Commune were a mix of old-style Jacobins, Proudhonist advocates of producers' cooperatives and political federation, and revolutionary socialists and communists. However, after representatives of affluent bourgeois districts decided to resign from the Commune, all equally saw themselves as instruments of the rule of French workers over the capital city of France. The National Government was certain that the revolutionary Commune would collapse, as workers' representatives would prove incapable of mastering its complex administrative and bureaucratic machinery. But the Communards had no intension of

[16] See Frank Jellinek, *The Paris Commune of 1871*, New York, Grosset and Dunlap, 1965.

preserving that machinery; instead they replaced it with a form of organization that broke decisively with bureaucratic and parliamentary models. Nine Commissions conducted the work of the Commune, making decisions they reported to the whole body of representatives in secret session each morning. The entire Commune would then decide whether or not to veto or alter those decisions, before making them publically known. Though the important Commissions devoted to administration and defense were in the hands of the Jacobins, socialists and communists connected with the International Workingmen's Association controlled the Commission for Labor and Exchange, the source of the Commune's social and economic legislation. The professional army and police force were abolished, in part because of their collapse with the flight of the National Government to Versailles, and replaced with the population of armed workers, organized in units of the National Guard. The representatives serving in the Commune were subject to recall by their electoral districts, and their salaries were fixed at a level not to exceed that of well-paid workers. In *The Civil War in France*, Marx, who had never harbored any illusions about the survival of the Commune, argued that its chief innovation was to recognize that the working class "cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." [17]Instead it must "smash" or "break up" (*zerbrechen*) that machinery, in the words of his earlier book, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,[18] and replace it with a political structure that would enable workers to govern their own fate as well as that of society as a whole. Given the flight of the professional, bourgeois administration, the political reconstruction of the Commune might have been more a matter of necessity than conscious and principled choice. Nevertheless, Marx was right about its radically innovative character. No subsequent "workers state" has equaled or surpassed it, certainly not the centralized, hierarchical, party-states of historical record.

The extent of the Commune's social and economic measures were less dramatic than its new form of politics, for the reason that it worked under the urgent pressure of defending Paris against military assault from Versailles. Still, the Commission of Labor and Exchange managed to adopt measures that were first steps in the direction of a new society. It regulated contracted wages, abolished fines in factories and night work in bakeries, and, most importantly, decreed occupation by workers of factories abandoned by their owners, as well as their reorganization on a cooperative basis.

There is far more to say about communism, its appearance in different contexts, locations, and historical periods, than I have been able to convey in this short treatment. A full accounting could only be the work of an interdisciplinary project involving anthropologists, economists, sociologists, political scientists, historians, literary scholars, and philosophers. But I think that I have said enough here to establish the point that communism does not begin with either Marx or the Russian Revolution, that it

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[17] Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*, in *Karl Marx, The First International and After, Political Writings, Volume 3*, David Fernbach editor, London, Penguin Books, 1974, page 206.

[18] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Karl Marx, Surveys from Exile, Political Writings, Volume 2*, David Fernbach editor, London, Penguin Books, 1973, page 238. In the German edition: *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, in *Karl Marx u. Friedrich Engels, Werke*, Bd. 8, Berlin/DDR, Dietz Verlag,1960, page 202.

is a social practice whose origins lie deep in human prehistory, that it appears again and again in historical time in familial, religious, and secular forms, and that it cannot be decisively refuted by any supposed “critical experiment,” including the failure of the Soviet and related regimes. If the opposite were true, then we might as well claim that the need to eat has been refuted by the occurrence of famine. The discussion that has followed the London Conference of 2007 likes to refer to communism as an “Idea,” and there is an important element of truth in this. But we ought to remember that this Idea does not float in the heavens, that it has been instantiated (as philosophers say) many times in concrete empirical detail, and so also constitutes what the French now like to call “The Real,” a stubbornly living and returning actuality.

Now back to the Occupy Movement. Its communism clearly consists in the way in which the material and intellectual life of the camps was organized. Money or any other *quid pro quo* exchange of goods and services was abolished, while food, clothing, medical care, entertainment, education (including classes, lectures, and a library), and legal services were provided free of charge. In fact, with the exception of legal services, these resources were available to visitors as well as campers, all without any exchange of money or goods. Though most campers brought their own tents to the encampments, those who could not afford them were supplied with tents at no cost. We have to pause and consider just how radical such practices are. For the two months or so they existed, the camps succeeded in dong away with the commodity form that lies at the heart of capitalist society. This was true not only for consumption, but for work as well. Labor was organized and conducted on a volunteer basis, most of it by the various working groups. It included food preparation and service, acquisition and distribution of clothing, weatherization, medical care, garbage disposal, security, information services, lectures and workshops, spiritual and religious services, legal services, educational resources and events, art and entertainment, digital streaming and video-recording, maintenance of a website, and communication with the press, police, and city officials. All of this was established by a direct democracy in the form of General Assemblies (open to all who decided to attend), and managed by the working groups responsible to the Assemblies. Babeuf and the Communards would have approved. It is true of course that the communist economy of the camps existed on a relatively small scale. There were only two or three hundred campers in even the largest encampments. But when marches and demonstrations took place, or on ordinary weekends when the weather was nice, the number of people at any given camp in a 24 hour period could swell to several thousand. The creation of a communist economy on this scale for two months, in 800 or so locations across the United Sates, was no mean achievement. This is especially evident when we consider the fact that this economy was managed by decision-making bodies practicing, not only direct democracy, but one based on modified consensus, requiring a vote of 90 percent of the Assembly to pass contentious measures over objections.

This analysis of the communist significance of the camps is not an external one. It is implicit in the way occupiers regarded the camps, though few, if any, thought to use the word “communism” in this regard. Of course, this isn’t surprising considering the impact that the McCarthy and Reagan periods, as well as liberal cold war anti-communism, has

had on the political culture of the United States. Still, those active in the Occupy movement saw the abolition of commodity exchange, as well as its positive inverse, a realized principle of distribution in accordance with need, as a major achievement of the encampments. A fine synopsis, "2011: A Year in Revolt," recently posted on the Occupy Wall Street website, makes the following point:

> Fueled by anger at the growing disparities between rich and poor, frustrated by government policies that benefit a tiny elite at the expense of the majority, and tired of the establishment's failure to address fundamental economic inequalities, OWS offered a new solution. We built a People's Kitchen to feed thousands, opened a People's Library, created safer spaces, and provided free shelter, bedding, medical care, and other necessities to anyone who needed them. While cynics demanded we elect leaders and make demands on politicians, we were busy creating alternatives to those very institutions. **A revolution has been set in motion, and we cannot be stopped.**
>
> **…**
>
> Today, tens of thousands of everyday people are putting ideals like solidarity, mutual aid, anti-oppression, autonomy, and direct democracy into practice. Individuals are joining together in city-wide General Assemblies and autonomous affinity groups. Through consensual, non-hierarchical, and participatory self-governance, we are literally laying the framework for a new world by building it here and now -- *and it works.*[19]

If this had been simply an experiment in creating intentional communities, it would have been impressive enough. But it was much more than that. It occurred in the heart of Wall Street, as well as locations in other cities identified with the overwhelming power of finance capitalism in our current period of globalization. The Occupy Movement created examples of a functioning communist society, and threw them in the face of the financial institutions that had recently pulled off yet another massive enclosure of the commons, in the form of the public bailout following in the wake of the subprime mortgage debacle. No wonder the mayors sent the police to shut the camps down. The vanguard and communist characteristics of the Occupy encampments were in this way organically connected. The forward outposts, located deep in enemy territory, of the detachments agitating for a more egalitarian future were also provocative anticipatory realizations of the kind of society they proposed as an alternative to the existing one.

Which Way Forward?

We need to distinguish between the future of the Occupy movement, and the future of the long march toward an egalitarian society. "The arc of the moral universe is long,"

[19] "2011: A Year in Revolt," January 3, 2012, on the Occupy Wall Street website, http://occupywallst.org/article/2011-year-revolt/

said Martin Luther King, “but it bends toward justice.”[20] We don’t know exactly where we are along that arc. One possibility is that Occupy has already accomplished all that it can, that it is a spent force that may linger for a while, but will eventually disappear, its activists returning to private life. Another possibility is that a good many Occupy activists will be successfully recruited by the Democratic Party, or by the unions and nonprofits associated with it. That means that they will go where American social movements usually go when it’s time to die. Though I can’t foresee the future, I doubt that either of these predictions will turn out to be correct, at least not completely so. It seems more likely to me that the main forces in Occupy will retain their radicalism, bringing it perhaps in new forms to college campuses, neighborhoods, and workplaces. I also think that we will see a return of attempts to create encampments in public places in the spring, though I have no idea how any of that might turn out.

Whatever proves to be the case, Occupy leaves the partisans of egalitarian transformation in the United States with three important questions. The first is, how do we discuss the kind of society we are seeking to bring into existence in terms suited to our political culture. Although the word “communism” might be a prescription for marginalization in the United States, we do have a venerable linguistic alternative, used in the early 20th century by the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota, as well as by an influential political federation in Saskatchewan, Canada. The term is “cooperative commonwealth,” and I suggest that we restore it to use. After all, the word “communism” goes back only to the mid-19th century. Composed of the Latin terms *com* and *unis* (meaning something like, “together as one”), it does not communicate much of the content of the communist idea. The phrase, “cooperative commonwealth,” is far more descriptive of the social and economic order communists actually seek to create.

But that is just a matter of terminology. The more difficult aspect of the problem is to specify the institutional arrangements of a cooperative commonwealth under the conditions of the early 21st century, given its highly developed division of labor, its formally educated workforce, its complex and extensive system of travel, its range of services and consumer goods, the complexity of its medical needs, and the extent of its connections with the global economy. Almost all of this remains to be settled in complicated processes of discussion, experimentation, and further discussion. We cannot remain content with the claim that what was possible in the Occupy encampments is possible on the scale of the entire nation. But there are some promising beginnings, emerging in different sectors of society, of a solution to the problem of how new institutional arrangements ought to be conceived.

Among them are developed proposals for a universal basic income, something that already exists, in modest form, in what we should perhaps call, “The People’s Republic of Alaska.”[21] The Alaska Permanent Fund guarantees to each Alaska resident an equal share of a portion of the oil revenue that would otherwise go to private corporations. The Fund thus brings into common ownership and egalitarian distribution at least a portion

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[20] Martin Luther King in his speech on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol on March 25, 1965.

[21] See the writings of Philippe Van Parijs on Universal Basic Income, especially, *Real Freedom For All: What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

of an important natural resource, a part of what Winstanley called the "Common Treasury." For those wanting to establish a connection with the American revolutionary tradition, Thomas Paine, author of the pamphlet, "Common Sense," that inspired the first armed uprisings against the British Empire, advocated a universal basic income.[22] His argument is that those who have been deprived of their rightful share of the Common Treasury deserve monetary compensation for what has been denied them.

In the United States, people have been experimenting with a range of new economic forms, some directly communist, others involving limited and egalitarian forms of exchange. These include gift "markets," skill exchanges, cooperative housing, neighborhood gardening and community farming, local currencies, credit unions, decentralized energy sources, and consumer and producer cooperatives. Together they comprise a significant sector of the economy. The experience of the Cleveland-based Evergreen Cooperative Development Fund in particular deserves serious study.[23] The Fund has had considerable success linking worker-owned producer cooperatives to semi-planned purchasing by public institutions, such as universities and hospitals, in an industrial city that has been devastated by its abandonment by corporate capital. The development of an expanded and integrated sector of cooperatives would not make any less pressing the need to democratize workplaces in privately owned companies, as well as to assure rank-and-file control of labor unions. Worker's self-management should be extended far beyond the employer-sponsored "quality control circles" of the 1980s and 90s. In addition, a revamped system of ESOPs (Employee Stock Option Programs) has the potential to advance collective ownership even in the private sector. We also need to renew long-discussed proposals to bring collectively owned pension funds under the direct control of the workers who "own," but do not control them.[24] This may be the most practical way of socializing direction of the investment function on a large scale in the near future. Social ownership of banks by means of their conversion into a public utility, subject to the control of local communities, also flows naturally from Occupy's critique of Wall Street.

Finally, we should not neglect the new kinds of cyber-collectivity emergent on the Internet. The Open Source movement is an important development in the cooperative creation and distribution of software, free of charge to the user; the Creative Commons revamping of copyright permissions makes electronic material available for public use, but not for profit; the decision of some universities to place professors' course materials on websites accessible to the public is a step in the direction of free higher education; and the supplying of students with laptops and tablets by public schools is a form of social provision of computer hardware, as is the widespread availability of computers in public libraries.

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[22] Thomas Paine, "Agrarian Justice," in *The Thomas Paine Reader*, Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick editors, London, Penguin Books, 1987, pages 471-489.

[23] See Gar Alperovitz, Thad Williamson, and Ted Howard, "The Cleveland Model," in *The Nation*, March 1, 2010.

[24] See Robin Blackburn, 'The New Collectivism: Pension Reform, Grey Capitalism, and Complex Socialism', in *New Left Review*, I/233, January – February, 1999.

This brings us, however, to the second question that the Occupy movement must face. And that is, what do we do about the Sword? Every communist movement that has come close to establishing alternative social and economic structures has had to face the repressive violence of a state that serves the interests of the owners of private capital. The Occupy activists encountered the Sword in the relatively mild form of police evictions. Other communists have faced long-term imprisonment, counter-revolutionary war, and execution, including mass killings bordering on genocide (right-wing generals murdered nearly one million Indonesian communists in late 1965 and early 1966). Like the slave owners and aristocrats of the past, the owners of private capital do not give up without a fight. They have proven willing to mobilize their enormous material, political, military, and ideological resources as forces of destruction whenever their core interests are threatened.

The strategies have not yet been invented that are able to defeat the violent opposition of the dominant class and its state, while creating a new society that is not itself distorted by the methods it uses to defeat the enemy. Nonviolent direct action does not yet comprise such a strategy.[25] It has indeed been effective on a large scale, but in limited contexts, and especially when able to appeal to nationalist feeling, including national liberation struggles in the Third World (India, South Africa), and movements of national resistance (Denmark against the German army in the 1940s). Its most transformative application was probably the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, but even this astonishing blow against racial inequality involved no more than the assertion of rights that were supposed to have been guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Nonviolent direct action has not yet triumphed in any movement that seeks to turn the fundamental social and economic order upside down. It remains to be seen whether it can develop the methods, strategies, and tactics needed to defend processes of radical social and economic transformation from violent attack. One thing, however, is certain. Such a development will never take place without clarity about the nature of the problem, as well as the resolute will to solve it.

The third question, intimately related to the second, is what do we do about the state? What kind of political order can enable the adult population to govern a society the size and complexity of the United States, in a way that is both practical, and truly capable of advancing the wellbeing of all? On this question, Occupy activists have been the least convincing. They have vacillated between an anarchist dream of a stateless society, perhaps composed of nothing but General Assemblies; a liberal dream of a revived New Deal, administered by some democratically purified version of the federal government, elected perhaps through publicly financed campaigns; and a kind of progressive version of strict constructionism, involving a return to the constitutional liberties of the American past, which are supposed to have been in robust condition prior to the triumph of the corporations, with their outrageous claim to legal personhood.

Unfortunately, these options are hopelessly naïve. The anarchist dream of a stateless society, run by General Assemblies on the basis of consensus, is a nonstarter for two

[25] The classic work on the political philosophy, strategy and tactics of nonviolent struggle is Gene Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*, U.S., Sargent (Porter),1973 -1985.

reasons. The first is that the General Assemblies rarely make important decisions. The consensus process is complicated and time-consuming, and the fact that 10 percent of the Assembly is able to block any decision runs the risk of stasis by rule of the minority. If it were not for the decisions of relatively small groups of people simply to act in order to see what might happen, very little would have been accomplished by the movement. The second reason is that General Assemblies are, in some ways, less democratic than representative institutions, since only those able to spend a significant amount of time in face-to-face meetings are able to participate. This excludes most working people, especially unmarried heads of households, the majority of whom are women. The liberal dream of a renewal of the New Deal is equally problematic. American capitalism has changed radically since the Great Depression. Keynesian pump priming no longer generates dollars spent primarily on products made in the United States, but rather on products made, often by American corporations, in low-wage countries such as India and China. For this reason, the ability of federal spending to stimulate the domestic economy is much weaker in the era of globalization than it was when Roosevelt was president. Finally the progressive version of a strict constructionist reading of the American constitutional past indulges in a myth. The Constitutional Convention was neither the source nor the protector of the liberties of ordinary Americans.[26] It was convened in reaction to uprisings of poor farmers, and the document it produced was largely an effort by the wealthy to suppress the power of the poor. Jefferson was suspicious of the Convention, Patrick Henry said that he "smelt a rat," and the Constitution could survive ratification votes of the some of the more democratic state legislatures only through the reluctant promise of the signers that a Bill of Rights would be included after ratification. The chairman of the Convention, John Jay, was truthful enough to say publicly that, "the men who own the country ought to govern it." Recognition of slavery in the Three-Fifths Compromise, exclusion of Native Americans from the electorate, appointment of the President, and initially of senators, by the electoral college rather than through direct election by the voters, and acceptance of restriction by the States of the right to vote for members of the House of Representatives to male property-owners, are enough to show that the original Constitution is nothing that a genuine egalitarian would want to embrace.

So where does that leave us? In the final analysis, the most important achievement of the Occupy movement may lie in the fact that it has created a situation in which it is possible to raise the three questions identified above. These are the questions that have always been faced by those who set out to create an egalitarian society under the conditions of capitalism. But it is only when the possibility of transformation comes alive in social movements, that the questions can be raised in a way that has real consequences. If it can raise and discuss these questions clearly, with focus and persistence, and in a fashion that involves increasing numbers of people, then the Occupy movement will have an important impact on the egalitarian politics of the future, whether or not it survives in anything like its current form.

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[26] See *The United States Constitution: 200 Years of Anti-Federalist, Abolitionist, Feminist, Muckraking, Progressive, and Especially Socialist Criticism*, Bertell Ollman and Jonathan Birnbaum editors, New York, New York University, 1990.

Let me list those questions again. What detailed economic arrangements does a cooperative commonwealth call for? What strategies are able to defeat the violence of a state devoted to protecting the interests of the owners of private capital? What articulated combination of direct democratic and representative political institutions should replace the existing state?

If activists can initiate and sustain this conversation, then the Occupy camps may come to take an honorable place alongside the Digger colony at Saint Georg's Hill, Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals, and the Paris Commune, and, like them, continue to nourish the roots of egalitarian transformation.