

ENGL 114: Peace and Protest  
Professor Annie Killian

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Kelsea Jeon

Occupy Wall Street: Creating a Successful Movement from a Chaotic Structure  
by Kelsea Jeon

Towards the end of another long day of publicly occupying what demonstrators renamed Liberty Plaza and actively fighting the rampant criminality stemming from Wall Street, a three-hour long civil battle was just beginning. A crowd of four to five hundred people clustered around the steps of the park's eastern side for the daily General Assembly. Rotating facilitators from working groups and individual proposers voiced concerns and presented solutions. In return, assembly participants asked questions and debated proposals. During the discussion process, it was not uncommon for an individual at any moment to spontaneously yell, "Mic check!" after which the crowd echoed, "Mic check"! Expanding this inclusive chanting system beyond mere technical checkpoints to contagious mantras, participants created a sense of unity through this interactive means of mass communication. Debates continued until the facilitator asked participants to indicate via hand motions whether or not they wanted to ratify certain proposals. When there was a ninety-percent consensus, indicated by a vigorous shimmying of upraised hands, the motion passed and the proposal was adopted.

In a utopian society, this porous, directly democratic method of decision-making would effortlessly produce satisfying results. In reality, however, the clashing views of the ninety-nine percent that the movement supposedly represented stifled the General Assembly's legislative process. Multiple people simultaneously attempted to summon the mic and diversity deterred consensus, culminating in a horizontal process plagued by chaos rather than efficiency.

Characterized by this unique methodology of organizing mass demonstrations, the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Movement introduced and widely popularized the directly democratic practice of horizontalism to the social protest arena. Whereas vertical hierarchy spotlights prominent leaders, presents narrow demands, and convokes issue-specific rallies, horizontal hierarchy lacks official spokespeople, idealizes compromise, and advances broad agendas (FAQ). Rather than praise such democratic strategy as horizontalism, scholars have instead pinpointed it as the Achilles' heel of the OWS Movement. Baruch College Professor and member of the Occupy Wall Street Labor Support Group, Jackie DiSalvo, wrote in 2015: "[Occupy Wall Street's] supposedly 'leaderless' horizontalism and consensus process made decisions impossible [and] the autonomy of individuals produced an inability to coordinate its many working groups" (DiSalvo 264). While her claim that Occupy's unique horizontal structure prolonged and convoluted the decision-making process is certainly valid, it is crucial for scholars to reassess horizontalism relative to Occupy's overarching purpose of inspiring citizens to take direct action. In the case of Occupy, horizontalism was indeed a deliberative, beneficial strategy because "efficiency is not the measuring stick of success here. Democracy is" (Gautney).

In this paper, I will first review the current scholarship identifying horizontalism as the ultimate downfall of Occupy Wall Street. Recognizing that this claim is based on a flawed assumption about the movement's principal goal, I will then reframe OWS' organic organizational strategy in relation to the movement's actual purpose of inciting participatory action from individuals. After establishing the link between OWS' structure and objective, I will prove how horizontalism promoted its purpose by creating an attractive, inclusive, and empowering atmosphere for participants. Finally, I will demonstrate the positive effects of

horizontalism post-demonstration to illuminate how this structure encouraged individuals not only to engage in OWS, but also in various Occupy offshoots across the nation.

Current dialogue surrounding OWS' practice of horizontalism suggests that its lack of organization and leaders produced a structurally tenuous movement. As a system that embraces individual autonomy, the capacity to be one's own person and determine one's own decisions (Christman), horizontalism often allows for "anyone to set up a working group, even a phony one, to gain representation in the [assembly]" (DiSalvo 275). Championing the notion of equal representation, activists who felt that peers' unpopular opinions were suppressed frequently shouted in defense, "Let them speak!" (DiSalvo 275). Because individuals without legitimate concerns overtly interjected during assembly meetings, DiSalvo argues, minority tyranny prevailed and majority rule failed. Furthermore, Executive Director of *Organizing 2.0*, a nationwide networking group for activists, Charles Lenchner, claimed that without legitimate leadership positions and sustainable institutions, "long-term supporters who engage with each other to build power" were dissuaded from participating. (DiSalvo 276). Assuming that experienced, devoted activists engage in a cause for the prospect of gaining power, Lenchner blames horizontalism and its refrain from official leadership positions for the dearth of devoted participants.

Addressing these scholars' claims, while it is ideal for solely reasonable individuals to present their concerns, as DiSalvo has posited, participants, however unorthodox their ideas may be, have the right to voice their opinions. Emphasizing direct democracy over efficiency, protesters deliberately and knowingly sacrificed a streamlined decision-making process for increased participation. Additionally, Lenchner's argument that horizontalism is at fault for the

lack of dedicated activists is fallacious, as individuals motivated by self-interests rather than group needs are generally ill-suited to be leaders of mass movements.

Admittedly, horizontalism's preservation of individual autonomy and absence of official leaders created a dysfunctional structure of governance among the demonstrators, yet it is misguided to assume that inefficiency equates to failure. Instead, inefficiency and dissolution were unavoidable side-effects of OWS' actual goal -- to create a laboratory of participatory action and to inspire citizens to engage in a direct democracy. On the movement's official webpage, OWS is described as the economic "99% trying to wrestle control of its government out of the hands of the 1%" and is deliberately "leaderless and partyless" to "... communicate not just outrage, but a full on call to action" (About OWS). It's a movement without "one or two simple demands, though many demand them of [Occupiers]" (About OWS). The umbrella slogan of the ninety-nine percent, however, is a mere surface level label. Occupy's thousands of participants, akin in financial conditions, held few commonalities in beliefs and concerns beyond their economic statuses. Despite outsiders' suggestions that official leaders and narrow demands would have created unity and bolstered the political influence of the movement, they largely misunderstood the legitimate purpose of OWS. Occupy was not about single-handedly fighting the corruption on Wall Street or advocating for a specific piece of reform; it was about calling the people to action. With this renewed perception of OWS, horizontalism, although entropic, enabled the movement to attract, include, and empower thousands of individuals. In accordance with the advice plastered on an Occupier's cardboard sign, "Don't mistake the complexity of this movement for chaos" (VanGelder 43). Horizontalism was not a weakness, but a strength of the movement.

By intentionally adopting a gridlock-ridden legislative system designed to produce ambiguous proposals, the Occupy Wall Street Movement enlarged its targeted audience of potential participants. In the General Assembly, the movement's decision-making body, proposals became official when there were supermajority approvals of at least ninety percent. Considering how our very own United States Congress, a professional legislative body, struggles to pass bills with a simple majority (fifty percent plus one), it is virtually impossible for a diverse group of both veteran and novice activists to reach a ninety percent threshold. Therefore, for propositions to have passed, they were oftentimes so ambiguous and general as to go largely uncontested. These vague proposals were neither intended nor expected to address specific policy issues. Instead, they sought to attract masses of activists, as the "absence of a narrow definition ... and avoidance of concrete demands drew people from various backgrounds and political ideologies" (Kadirgamar). Promoting specific demands creates an exclusive and internally divided movement. Individuals who did not share the movement's same narrow aims would have been dissuaded from joining and the inevitable minority who did not believe in the majority's demands would have been left feeling alienated and ignored. As a result of implementing a decision-making structure that guaranteed the creation of accessible proposals, OWS struck thousands of individuals as an attractive movement to join.

Accompanying the movement's inclusive set of demands, the welcoming atmosphere of assembly meetings via routine procedural reviews encouraged the involvement of newcomers. Because of the movement's horizontal structure that glorified equality, "a newcomer [was] as important as someone who's been there from the beginning, so the process of the assembly [was] explained at every meeting." (Randolph). If one lacked experience or was unfamiliar with social protest, it is probable that these presumed disadvantages would have deterred one from getting

involved. To reassure novices that no prior experience was necessary, the first few minutes of every General Assembly were always reserved for teaching newcomers essential procedural knowledge. Countless hours of time spent on review could have been used to advance discussions, however, Occupy organizers prioritized facilitating a welcoming atmosphere to encourage new participants to join the demonstrations. By stressing the importance of every individual -- veteran or novice -- the inefficient, yet hospitable movement lured in thousands of outsiders to join fellow citizens in a massive call to action on Wall Street.

Lacking an official leader to blindly follow, empowered protesters of OWS symbolized a rejection of the United States' "representative" democracy and demonstrated a desire for a truly representative, direct democracy. In social protests and mass demonstrations, a "leader" is defined as a prominent, legitimate, and influential authoritative figure who governs the movement and voices constituents' concerns. While OWS had rotating facilitators for practical purposes of sustaining the movement, it is inaccurate to label these neutral managers as spokespeople. In leader-follower relationships, there is an implicit social contract in which followers sacrifice unbounded expression and instead relay their concerns to a trusted leader, confident that he or she will passionately fight for the common good. This mutual relationship is the basis of our American Democratic Republic, yet by rejecting the concept of leadership, the Occupy Wall Street Movement illuminated a widespread belief in the "failure of representative democracy in the United States" (Gautney). In a nation where political contributions equate to speech, it is commonplace for lobbyists and corporations to voice their support for or against legislative agendas through their powerful checkbooks. Influenced by an alluring monetary appeal, Congressional members are perceived as more inclined to represent interests of those with capital rather than those without. Consequently, this system has created an unrepresentative

democracy and has convinced constituents of the ninety-nine percent that their right to speak carries little relevance if they have no right to be heard. Reflecting this frustration through their mass movement, OWS demonstrators created a leaderless structure not only to express their repudiation of America's representative democracy, but also to suggest a new form of governance: a direct democracy in which every individual directly voices his or her own beliefs.

In addition to encouraging participants to exercise individual autonomy, OWS fostered a trial-and-error laboratory of participatory action that developed veteran activists and inspired innovation in social protests. In the General Assembly, decisions were made through a "consensus process" in which people discussed issues until they had met a "general agreement that all can feel satisfied with" (Sitrin). While it was highly unlikely for each participant to be completely satisfied with every decision made, this process was "not about converting other people to one's way of thinking. It was about compromise. For every person involved, there was a new viewpoint to consider" (Gautney). Actively enforcing a system based on compromise allows for individuals to become better listeners, better negotiators, and better team players. Although this process of decision-making was not the most streamlined means of producing results, it was effective in teaching individuals universal skills necessary for organizing any movement.

While participants emerged as skilled, experienced activists, they also gained inspiration for various offshoots through the trial-and-error practice of OWS. Justine Tunney, one of the editors of OccupyWallSt.org, commented that the laboratory of participatory democracy inspired innovation because once activists realized the efficacy of a concept, they could "copy what's been built and use it to build something else" (Schwartz). As a result of exposing and training

thousands of novice activists, the Occupy Wall Street Movement transformed from being leaderless to leader-full.

After the New York Police Department officially evicted Occupy Wall Street protesters from Liberty Plaza on November 15, 2011, empowered movement expatriates created offshoots of OWS in various economic, social, and political spheres. Such branches of the Occupy Movement include the following examples: Occupy Our Homes, a group working to prevent the foreclosure of people's homes; Occupy Sandy, a relief effort created to assist victims of Hurricane Sandy; and Occupy the NRA, an organization formed in response to the Sandy Hook massacre in Connecticut that advocates for gun control policies (Dean 382). What started out as a movement to fight the political and economic corruption stemming from Wall Street transformed into a massive interactive workshop that gave individuals personal experience with social protests. Emerging as both experienced and inspired, the trained activists bred by the Occupy Wall Street Movement used their formative experiences to create and engage in various other social movements across the nation. By allowing for individuals to glean first-hand experience with social protests and inspiring them to take action, Occupy was not a niche movement, but a contagious concept that branched into various societal facets.

Despite the current scholarship that Occupy Wall Street's embrace of horizontalism greatly contributed to the movement's demise, a reexamination of this strategy in light of the movement's purpose reveals that horizontalism was a blessing, not a bane. From an outsider's perspective, it is easy to categorize the disorganized, leaderless movement as a band of disunited revolutionaries wreaking havoc in the financial capital of America. However, it is overly critical and inaccurate to label OWS as a failure because of its inability to successfully wrestle control of the government from the political elite; legislative change was not the goal of OWS. Aware that



solving deeply rooted societal and political issues is a multi-step process that begins with the slow-moving needle of participation, speeds up with intersection of protest and politics, and ends with significant reform. The Occupy Movement tackled the first step: To inspire direct action.

Five years after the dissolution of Occupy Wall Street, 2016 Democratic Party presidential nominee Bernie Sanders championed the issue of money in politics as the theme of his campaign. While Sanders was unsuccessful in his efforts to clinch the nomination, he reinvigorated the conversation about the need for economic justice and reaffirmed the need for political reform. The Occupy Wall Street Movement certainly was not the panacea for the economic corruption tainting our American democracy, however, the path to significant change must start somewhere. Based in New York's symbolic Liberty Plaza, the ephemeral OWS served as the historic starting point that catalyzed political action and participation across the nation.

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