To the Precinct Station: How theory met practice ...and drove it absolutely crazy

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There is a scene I always recall when I try to remember the exhilarating effect that Occupy Wall Street had on me when it was first getting going. I was on a subway train in Washington, D.C., reading an article about the protests in Zuccotti Park in Manhattan. It was three years after the Wall Street bailouts. It was two years after everyone I knew had given up hope in the creativity of Barack Obama. It was two months after the bankers’ friends in the Republican Party had pushed the country right to the brink of default in order to underscore their hallucinatory economic theories. Like everyone else, I had had enough.

Anyhow, the subway car was boarded by some perfectly dressed, perfectly polished corporate executive, clearly on the way back from some trade show, carrying a tote bag that bore some jaunty slogan about maximizing shareholder value or what a fine thing luxury is or how glorious it is to be a winner—the kind of sentiment that had been commonplace a short while before but that the American public had now turned bitterly against. The man was clearly uncomfortable with it on his person. And I considered the situation: Once upon a time I would have been embarrassed to hold a copy of this magazine on a crowded subway, but now it was people like him who would have to conceal what they did. Your service to the 1 percent would no longer be something you could boast about without feeling the contempt of your fellow Metro passengers.

A while later I happened to watch an online video of an Occupy panel discussion held at a bookstore in New York; at some point in the recording, a panelist objected to the way protesters had of saying they were “speaking for themselves” rather than acknowledging that they were part of a group. Another one of the panelists was moved to utter this riposte:
What I would note, is that people can only speak for themselves, that the self would be under erasure there, in that the self is then held into question, as any poststructuralist thought leading through anarchism would push you towards. . . .
I would agree, an individualism that our society has definitely had inscribed upon it and continues to inscribe upon itself, “I can only speak for myself,” the “only” is operative there, and of course these spaces are being opened up . . .
My heart dropped like a broken elevator. As soon as I heard this long, desperate stream of pseudointellectual gibberish, I knew instantly that this thing was doomed.

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“There is a danger,” the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek warned the Occupy Wall Street encampment in Zuccotti Park last year, and he wasn’t referring to the New York Police Department. “Don’t fall in love with yourselves.”
We have a nice time here. But remember, carnivals come cheap. What matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal lives. Will there be any changes then?
Žižek’s remarks appear in *n+1* magazine’s *Occupy!: Scenes from Occupied America* (Verso, $14.95), the first book, and one of the most eclectic, to appear on the subject of last year’s protests. That volume was eventually followed by numerous others ranging from speeches delivered to the encampments (Noam Chomsky’s *Occupy*; Zuccotti Park Press, $9.95) to historical considerations of the protest (Todd Gitlin’s *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street*; HarperCollins, $12.99) to collective memoirs by participants (*Occupy Wall Street: The Inside Story of an Action that Changed America*; Haymarket, $15). Before considering them, I have to ask that the usual disclaimers be applied with prejudice: Todd Gitlin is a friend of mine whose work I admire; Joe Sacco, who drew the cartoons that accompany the Chris Hedges entry, is another acquaintance and a onetime *Baffler* contributor; Will Bunch, whom I have never met, reviewed my last book (he was ambivalent about it); I know several of the contributors to the *n+1* anthology; other friends of mine contributed to the quasi-official Occupy memoir; and still other friends appear in these books’ pages, making statements, being quoted, that sort of thing. Left-wing actions are like family reunions, I guess.

Nearly all of these books wander more or less directly into the “danger” Žižek warned against. They are deeply, hopelessly in love with this protest. Each one takes for granted that the Occupy campaign was world-shaking and awe-inspiring—indeed, this attitude is often asserted in the books’ very titles: *This Changes Everything: Occupy Wall Street and the 99% Movement* (Berrett-Koehler, $9.95), for example. The authors heap up the superlatives without restraint or caution. “The 99% has awakened,” writes the editor of *Voices From the 99 Percent: An Oral History of the Occupy Wall Street Movement* (Red and Black, $15.99). “The American political landscape will never again be the same.” What happened in Zuccotti Park was “unprecedented,” declares Noam Chomsky. “There’s never been anything like it that I can think of.” But that is nothing when compared to the enthusiasm of former *New York Times* reporter Chris Hedges. In *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt* (Nation Books, $28) he compares Occupy to the 1989 revolutions in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. The protesters in New York, he writes, were disorganized at first, unsure of what to do, not even convinced they had achieved anything worthwhile, but they had unwittingly triggered a global movement of resistance that would reverberate across the country and in the capitals of Europe. The uneasy status quo, effectively imposed for decades by the elites, was shattered. Another narrative of power took shape. The revolution began.

Or had it begun twelve years previously? In 1999, you might recall, lefties nationwide swooned to hear about the WTO protests in Seattle; surely the tide was beginning to turn. Then, in 2008, liberal commentators swooned again for Senator Barack Obama: he was the leader we had been waiting for all these years. Then, in 2012, they swooned in precisely the same way for Occupy: it was totally unprecedented, it was the revolution, et cetera. I don’t object to any of these causes, as it happens—I supported Occupy; I voted for Obama; I was excited about the 1999 protests—but I can’t stand the swooning. These books were
written by educated people, certain of them experts on social movements. Why must they plunge so ecstatically into uncritical groupthink?

“Groupthink”? Yes. With a few exceptions here and there, these books are amazingly, soporifically the same. They tell the same anecdotes. They quote the same “communiqués.” They dwell on the same details. They even adopt, one after another, the same historical interpretations. (It is important to acknowledge the exceptions to this rule. Both the n+1 anthology and Todd Gitlin’s Occupy Nation deserve praise for occasionally taking a critical stance. The others are pretty much indistinguishable in their enthusiasm.)

And for the most part, what Žižek called our “normal lives” are not really part of the story. Nor are the “changes” that Occupy failed to secure. Even to bring them up, the reader senses, would be the act of a dullard. What matters, as author after author agrees, is the carnival—all the democratic and nonhierarchical things that went on in Zuccotti Park.

The details of that carnival are the subject matter of nearly all the books reviewed here—details that are described with loving, granular singularity. Should the reader be interested, she can now learn as much about what happened in Zuccotti Park in New York City during those magical sixty days of OWS as she can from other books about the inner workings of the Obama Administration, or the decision-making of Congress. Indeed, measured by words published per square foot of setting, Zuccotti Park may well be the most intensely scrutinized landscape in recent journalistic history. We know just about everything that went on there, and the tales are repeated from book to book: how the drummers kept everyone awake, what happened on the Brooklyn Bridge, how the “people’s mic” worked, where the idea for General Assemblies came from, how everyone pitched in and cleaned the park one frantic night to keep from being evicted the next day.

Measured in terms of words published per political results, on the other hand, OWS may be the most over-described historical event of all time. Nearly every one of these books makes sweeping claims for the movement’s significance, its unprecedented and earth-shattering innovations. Just about everything it does is brilliantly, inventively, mind-blowingly people-empowering.

And what do we have to show for it today in our “normal lives”? Not much. President Obama may talk about the “top 1 percent” now, but he is apparently as committed as ever to austerity, to striking a “grand bargain” with the Republicans.

Occupy itself is pretty much gone. It was evicted from Zuccotti Park about two months after it began—an utterly predictable outcome for which the group seems to have made inadequate preparation. OWS couldn’t bring itself to come up with a real set of demands until after it got busted, when it finally agreed on a single item. With the exception of some residual groups here and there populated by the usual activist types, OWS has today pretty much fizzled out. The media storm that once surrounded it has blown off to other quarters.

Pause for a moment and compare this record of accomplishment to that of Occupy’s evil twin, the Tea Party movement, and the larger right-wing revival of which it is a part. Well, under the urging of this trumped-up protest movement, the Republican Party proceeded to win a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives; in the state legislatures of the nation it took some six hundred
seats from the Democrats; as of this writing it is still purging Republican senators and congressmen deemed insufficiently conservative and has even succeeded in having one of its own named as the GOP’s vice-presidential candidate.

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The question that the books under consideration here seek to answer is: What is the magic formula that made OWS so successful? But it’s exactly the wrong question. What we need to be asking about Occupy Wall Street is: Why did this effort fail? How did OWS blow all the promise of its early days? Why do even the most popular efforts of the Left come to be mired in a gluey swamp of academic talk and pointless antihierarchical posturing?

The action certainly started with a bang. When the occupation of Zuccotti Park began, in September 2011, the OWS cause was overwhelmingly popular; indeed, as Todd Gitlin points out, hating Wall Street may well have been the most popular left-wing cause since the thirties. Inequality had reached obscene levels, and it was no longer the act of a radical to say so. The bank bailouts of the preceding years had made it obvious that government was captured by organized money. Just about everyone resented Wall Street in those days; just about everyone was happy to see someone finally put our fury in those crooks’ overpaid faces. People flocked to the OWS standard. Cash donations poured in; so did food and books. Celebrities made appearances in Zuccotti, and the media began covering the proceedings with an attentiveness it rarely gives to leftist actions.

But these accounts, with a few exceptions here and there, misread that overwhelming approval of Occupy’s cause as an approval of the movement’s mechanics: the camping out in the park, the way food was procured for an army of protesters, the endless search for consensus, the showdowns with the cops, the twinkles. These things, almost every writer separately assumes, are what the Occupy phenomenon was really about. These are the details the public hungers to know.

The building of a “community” in Zuccotti Park, for example, is a point of special emphasis. Noam Chomsky’s thoughts epitomize the genre when he tells us that “one of the main achievements” of the movement “has been to create communities, real functioning communities of mutual support, democratic interchange,” et cetera. The reason this is important, he continues, is because Americans “tend to be very isolated and neighborhoods are broken down, community structures have broken down, people are kind of alone.” How building such “communities” helps us to tackle the power of high finance is left unexplained, as is Chomsky’s implication that a city of eight million people, engaged in all the complexities of modern life, should learn how humans are supposed to live together by studying an encampment of college students.

The actual sins of Wall Street, by contrast, are much less visible. For example, when you read Occupying Wall Street, the work of a team of writers who participated in the protests, you first hear about the subject of predatory lending when a sympathetic policeman mentions it in the course of a bust. The authors themselves never bring it up.

And if you want to know how the people in Zuccotti intended to block the banks’ agenda—how they intended to stop predatory lending, for example—you
have truly come to the wrong place. Not because it’s hard to figure out how to stop predatory lending, but because the way the Occupy campaign is depicted in these books, it seems to have had no intention of doing anything except building “communities” in public spaces and inspiring mankind with its noble refusal to have leaders.

Unfortunately, though, that’s not enough. Building a democratic movement culture is essential for movements on the left, but it’s also just a starting point. Occupy never evolved beyond it. It did not call for a subtreasury system, like the Populists did. It didn’t lead a strike (a real one, that is), or a sit-in, or a blockade of a recruitment center, or a takeover of the dean’s office. The IWW free-speech fights of a century ago look positively Prussian by comparison.

With Occupy, the horizontal culture was everything. “The process is the message,” as the protesters used to say and as most of the books considered here largely concur. The aforementioned camping, the cooking, the general-assembling, the filling of public places: that’s what Occupy was all about. Beyond that there seems to have been virtually no strategy to speak of, no agenda to transmit to the world.

Whether or not to have demands, you might recall, was something that Occupy protesters debated hotly among themselves in the days when Occupy actually occupied something. Reading these books a year later, however, that debate seems to have been consensed out of existence. Virtually none of the authors reviewed here will say forthrightly that the failure to generate demands was a tactical mistake. On the contrary: the quasi-official account of the episode (Occupying Wall Street) laughs off demands as a fetish object of literal-minded media types who stupidly crave hierarchy and chains of command. Chris Hedges tells us that demands were something required only by “the elites, and their mouthpieces in the media.” Enlightened people, meanwhile, are supposed to know better; demands imply the legitimacy of the adversary, meaning the U.S. government and its friends, the banks. Launching a protest with no formal demands is thought to be a great accomplishment, a gesture of surpassing democratic virtue.

And here we come to the basic contradiction of the campaign. To protest Wall Street in 2011 was to protest, obviously, the outrageous financial misbehavior that gave us the Great Recession; it was to protest the political power of money, which gave us the bailouts; it was to protest the runaway compensation practices that have turned our society’s productive labor into bonuses for the 1 percent. All three of these catastrophes, however, were brought on by deregulation and tax-cutting—by a philosophy of liberation as anarchic in its rhetoric as Occupy was in reality. Check your premises, Rand-fans: it was the bankers’ own uprising against the hated state that wrecked the American way of life.

Nor does it require poststructuralism-leading-through-anarchism to understand how to reverse these developments. You do it by rebuilding a powerful and competent regulatory state. You do it by rebuilding the labor movement. You do it with bureaucracy.

Occupiers often seemed aware of this. Recall what you heard so frequently from protesters’ lips back in the days of September 2011: Restore the old Glass-
Steagall divide between investment and commercial banks, they insisted. Bring back big government! Bring back safety! Bring back boredom!

But that’s no way to fire the imagination of the world. So, how do you maintain the carnival while secretly lusting for the CPAs? By indefinitely suspending the obvious next step. By having no demands. Demands would have signaled that humorless, doctrinaire adults were back in charge and that the fun was over.

This was an inspired way to play the situation in the beginning, and for a time it was a great success. But it also put a clear expiration date on the protests. As long as demands and the rest of the logocentric requirements were postponed, Occupy could never graduate to the next level. It would remain captive to what Christopher Lasch criticized—way back in 1973—as the “cult of participation,” in which the experience of protesting is what protesting is all about.

None of the books discussed here can really bring themselves to this buzz-killing admission, however. More pleasant by far to go with the default interpretation instead: that Zuccotti itself was the lesson. That the process was indeed the message. That the correct way to tackle the power of the financial industry is—duh—to set up a temporary village in a nearby park and start teaching the world what “community” is.

The Occupy artifact that really blew me away in the early days was the Tumblr feed in which people posted handwritten accounts of their economic hardship. (Significantly, it is discussed at length in only one of the books considered here—the n+1 collection, again.) What made it such powerful testimony, I thought, was the way it embodied the 99 percent slogan; one heard unmistakably here the voices of average people from every walk of life, each one of them done in by the same bank-industry urge to screw the world, one customer at a time. You couldn’t ask for a better expression of Depression-style majoritarianism.

The rhetoric in Zuccotti Park was also, of course, loudly majoritarian. But in practice, to judge by these books, OWS tasted overwhelmingly of one monotonous flavor: academia, with a subtle bouquet of career activism. Protestors are not always identified by occupation in these books, but when they are, they usually turn out to be college students, or recent graduates, or graduate students, or professors. Episodes like the Student Day of Action in November 2011 loom large in the story. Slogans and protest signs gravitate toward such timeless adolescent causes as self-expression and finding yourself (“Seek your own truth,” reads a typical protest sign reproduced in one of these books). Occupiers are always said to be “creating a space” for things, a cliché of academia and the foundation world that I grew sick of hearing back in the nineties but that has lost none of its power as a simulation of profundity. And the episode as a whole has become an irresistible magnet for radical academics of the cultural-theory sort; indeed, for them it seems to have been a sort of holy episode, the moment they were waiting for, the putting into practice of their most treasured beliefs.

There’s nothing wrong with college students and grad students taking to the streets, of course. Society needs to hear from them. When tuition prices hit stratospheric levels, when recent grads routinely carry a hundred grand in debt,
and when people studying for a PhD are exploited shamelessly, they damn well ought to be protesting. They should be shutting the system down. They should be screaming for price controls. Just look at what happened earlier this year in Quebec, where a huge part of the population came out in support of student groups demanding affordable higher education: the protesters actually won. They got what they wanted. Social protest secured academic opportunity.

What I object to is the opposite: high-powered academic disputation as a model for social protest. Why does the subject of Occupy so often inspire its admirers to reach for their most elevated jargonese? Why would certain Occupiers break from the action to participate in panel discussions? Why did others choose to share their protest recollections in the pages of American Ethnologist and their protest sympathies in the Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies? Why would the author of an (admittedly very interesting) article about drum circles feel the need to suggest that he is contributing to “scholarly literature”? Why would a pamphlet clearly intended as a sort of Common Sense for the age of Occupy be filled with declarations such as this:

Our point of attack here is the dominant forms of subjectivity produced in the context of the current social and political crisis. We engage four primary subjective figures—the indebted, the mediatized, the securitized, and the represented—all of which are impoverished and their powers for social action are masked or mystified. Movements of revolt and rebellion, we find, provide us the means not only to refuse the repressive regimes under which these subjective figures suffer but also to invert these subjectivities in figures of power.

And dear god why, after only a few months of occupying Zuccotti Park, did Occupiers feel they needed to launch their own journal of academic theory? A journal that then proceeded to fill its pages with impenetrable essays seemingly written to demonstrate, one more time, the Arctic futility of theory-speak?

Is this how you build a mass movement? By persistently choosing the opposite of plain speech?

Yes, I know the answer: For a protest to become a broader social movement it must analyze and strategize and theorize. Well, this one did enough theorizing for all the protests of the last forty years, and yet it somehow never managed to make the grade.

Occupy did lots of things right: It had a great slogan and a perfect enemy and it captured the public imagination. It built a democratic movement culture. It reached out to organized labor, a crucial step in the right direction. It talked a lot about solidarity, the basic virtue of the Left. But in practice, academic requirements often seemed to come first. OWS was taken as a proving ground for theory. Its ranks weren’t just filled with professionals and professionals-to-be; far too often the campaign itself appeared to be an arena for professional credentialing.

Actually, that’s an optimistic way of putting it. The pessimistic way is to open Michael Kазин’s recent book, American Dreamers, and take sober note of the fact that, with the partial exception of the anti-apartheid campaign of the eighties, no movement of the Left has caught on with the broad American public since the Civil Rights / Vietnam War era. Oh, there have been plenty of leftists during this
period, of course—especially in academia. Studying “resistance” is a well-worn career path, if not the very definition of certain sub-disciplines. But for all its intellectual attainments, the Left keeps losing. It simply cannot make common cause with ordinary American people anymore.

Maybe this has happened because the Left has come to be dominated by a single profession whose mode of operating is deliberately abstruse, ultrahierarchical, argumentative, and judgmental—handing down As and Fs is its daily chore—and is thus the exact opposite of majoritarian. Maybe it has happened because the Left really is a place of Puritanical contempt for average people, almost all of whom can be shown to have sinned in some imperialist way or other. Maybe it is because the collapse of large-scale manufacturing makes social movements obsolete. We do not know. And none of the accounts under review here get us any closer to an answer.

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Occupy people don’t like Tea Party people; this is another point of unanimous agreement. Indeed, in the mind of Occupy, Tea Party people apparently aren’t really people at all; different biological principles apply to them. Consider a recent essay in Occupy’s theory journal by Judith Butler, a professor at Columbia University, who writes with revulsion about a Tea Party gathering where people reportedly cheered for the coming deaths of sick persons who weren’t insured. “Under what economic and political conditions do such joyous forms of cruelty emerge?” she asks.

It’s a good question. Two paragraphs later, however, the subject has inevitably changed to Occupy and its glamorous refusal to make demands, and Butler has theorized herself into a very different understanding of protesters-in-crowds: they are inherently liberationist. “[W]hen bodies gather as they do to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space, they are also making broader demands,” she writes. “They are demanding to be recognized and to be valued; they are exercising a right to appear and to exercise freedom; they are calling for a livable life.” This is automatically what indignant people do, just by showing up and enacting their existence with their bodies—except, apparently, when they are the people described two paragraphs before. When the indignant ones are Tea Partiers, I guess, their bodies carry a negative charge or something so that when they gather, what they demand is that the lives of others be stripped from them.

Which is a pretty huge difference, considering that the two movements are superficially so similar. For example, both are almost obsessively concerned with the bailouts of 2008, correctly understanding them as the departure point in public attitudes toward business and government. Participants in both describe the bailouts as “crony capitalism.” Both make their displeasure known by occupying public spaces, and both forms of protest cherish stories about the lengths to which their cadres have gone to keep those public spaces clean. Both Tea and Occupy gave Ron Paul followers prominent roles, and you could hear calls to “End the Fed” in Zuccotti Park as well as at the big Glenn Beck rallies. Then there were those Guy Fawkes masks, popular with both groups (Grover Norquist displays his prominently on his desk), which commemorate not the 99 percent or some red-state ur-American, but a comic-book loner who wages a
righteous, one-man war against a tyrannical government.

The movement cultures are similar, too. Tea Partiers as well as Occupiers deliberately kept their demands vague, the better to rope in a wide cross section of the discontented. And both groups fetishized their persecution. For the Occupiers it’s the cops, pepper-spraying the defenseless and rounding up the righteous in scenes that each of these books dwells on at length. Will Bunch’s October 1, 2011: The Battle of the Brooklyn Bridge (Kindle Singles, $1.99) is a forty-five-page account of how a single Occupy march ended in a mass arrest, while Chomsky’s book is dedicated to the “6,705 people who have been arrested supporting Occupy to date.” For the Tea Party, on the other hand, it’s the liberal media calling them “racist,” a bit of cruelty that right-wing authors reiterate as obsessively as the Occupiers do the cruelty of the NYPD. See, for example, Michael Graham’s 2010 book, That’s No Angry Mob, That’s My Mom: Team Obama’s Assault on Tea-Party, Talk-Radio Americans, which is concerned almost exclusively with cataloguing liberal insults directed at Tea people.

Leaderlessness is another virtue claimed by indignados on the right as well as left. In fact, there’s even a chapter in the 2010 “Tea Party manifesto” written by Dick Armey that is entitled, “We are a Movement of Ideas, Not Leaders”—which is ironic, since Armey is commonly referred to as “Leader Armey,” in recognition of the days when he was majority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives. The reasoning, though, is the same here as it is with Occupy. As Armey puts it, “If they knew who was in charge, they could attack him or her. They could crush the inconvenient dissent of the Tea Party.” Occupiers, of course, say pretty much the same thing: if you have leaders, they can be co-opted.

Surely, though, the distinctive Occupy idea that protesting is an end in itself—that “the process is the message”—surely that is unique, right? After all, Occupiers and their chroniclers have spent so much brainpower theorizing and explicating and defending the idea that horizontalism is a model and a demand and a philosophy rolled into one that it can’t possibly be shared by their political opposite.

But of course it is—with the theory slightly modified. “We call this complex and diverse movement ‘beautiful chaos,’” writes Leader Armey in his Tea Party manifesto. “By this we reference what is now the dominant understanding in organizational management theory: decentralization of personal knowledge is the best way to maximize the contributions of people.” While the glorious decentralization of OWS was supposed to enact some academic theory of space-creating, the glorious decentralization of the Tea Party enacts the principles of the market; it enacts the latest in management theory; it enacts democracy itself. Big-government liberals, on the other hand, are in Armey’s account drawn to hierarchy as surely as are the big-media dumbshits scorned by Occupy’s chroniclers: “They can’t imagine an undirected social order,” Armey declares. “Someone needs to be in charge.”

Armey’s coauthor, Matt Kibbe, then grabs this idea and gallops downfield. “This is not a political party,” he insists; “it is a social gathering.” Tea Party events don’t have drum circles, as far as I know, but Kibbe nevertheless says he is “reminded of the sense of community you used to experience in the parking lot before a Grateful Dead concert: peaceful, connected, smiling, gathered in
common purpose.” It is “a revolt from the bottom up,” he declares. It is “a community in the fullest sense of the word.”

If you look closely enough at Tea Party culture, you can even find traces of the Occupiers’ refusal to make explicit demands. Consider movement inamorata Ayn Rand (a philosopher every bit as prolix as Judith Butler) and her 1957 magnum opus *Atlas Shrugged*, where “demands” are something that government makes on behalf of its lazy and unproductive constituents. Businessmen, by contrast, deal in contracts; they act only via the supposedly consensual relations of the market. As John Galt, the leader of the book’s capital strike, explains in a lengthy speech to the American people Rand clearly loathed: “We have no demands to present to you, no terms to bargain about, no compromise to reach. You have nothing to offer us. *We do not need you.*”

A strike with no demands? Wha-a-a-a-a? Why not? Because demands would imply the legitimacy of their enemy, the state. Rand’s fake-sophisticated term for this is “the sanction of the victim.” In the course of actualizing himself, the business tycoon—the “victim,” in Rand’s distorted worldview—is supposed to learn to withhold his blessing from the society that exploits him via taxes and regulations. Once enlightened, this billionaire is to have nothing to do with the looters and moochers of the liberal world; it is to be adversarial proceedings only.

So how do Rand’s downtrodden 1 percent plan to prevail? By *building a model community in the shell of the old, exactly as Occupy intended to do.* Instead of holding assemblies in the park, however, her persecuted billionaires retreat to an uncharted valley in Colorado where they practice perfect noncoercive capitalism, complete with a homemade gold standard. A high-altitude Singapore, I guess. Then, when America collapses—an eventuality Rand describes in hundreds of pages of quasi-pornographic detail—the tycoons simply step forward to take over.

One last similarity. The distinctive ideological move of the Tea Party was, of course, to redirect the public’s fury away from Wall Street and toward government. And Occupy did it too, in a more abstract and theoretical way. Consider, for example, the words anthropologist Jeffrey Juris chooses when telling us why occupying parks was the thing to do: “the occupations contested the sovereign power of the state to regulate and control the distribution of bodies in space [five citations are given here], in part, by appropriating and resignifying particular urban spaces such as public parks and squares as arenas for public assembly and democratic expression [three more citations].” This kind of rhetoric is entirely typical of both Occupy and the academic Left—always fighting “the state” and its infernal power to “regulate and control”—but it doesn’t take a very close reading of the text to notice that this language, with a little tweaking, could also pass as a libertarian protest against zoning.

Since none of the books described here take seriously the many obvious parallels between the two protests, none of them offers a theory for why the two were so strikingly similar. Allow me, then, to advance my own.

The reason Occupy and the Tea Party were such uncanny replicas of one another is because they both drew on the lazy, reflexive libertarianism that suffuses our idea of protest these days, all the way from Disney Channel teens longing to be themselves to punk rock teens vandalizing a Starbucks. From Chris
Hedges to Paul Ryan, every dissenter imagines that they are rising up against “the state.” It’s in the cultural DNA of our times, it seems; our rock ‘n’ roll rebels, our Hollywood heroes, even our FBI agents. They all hate the state—protesters in Zuccotti Park as well as the Zegna-wearing traders those protesters think they’re frightening. But here’s the rub: only the Right manages to profit from it.

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As things developed, the Tea Party didn’t really mean any of its horizontalist talk; that was just there to make the movement attractive to potential joiners. The Tea Party had no poststructuralist thinkers contributing to theory magazines, but it did have money, organization, and a TV network at its back. It quickly developed leaders, and demands, and an alignment with a political party. Its main organizations eventually mutated into Super PACs, their antihierarchical populism apotheosized into money—which is, for free-market believers, the purest expression of the General Will available. And perhaps that was the plan of the movement’s masters all along. The vagueness and the leaderlessness were merely for show, it seems—gimmicks designed to give the product the widest possible appeal in the early days.

Occupy Wall Street never made that turn. It took its horizontality seriously. It grew explosively in the early days, as just about everyone with a beef rallied to its nonspecific standard. But after the crackdown came, there was almost nothing to show for it.

It is as clear to me today as it was last year, however, that the conservative era will be brought to a close only through some kind of mass social movement on the left. But what kind of movement might succeed?

Well, for one thing, a movement whose core values arise not from an abstract hostility to the state or from the need for protesters to find their voice but rather from the everyday lives of working people. It would help if the movement wasn’t centered in New York City. And it is utterly essential that it not be called into existence out of a desire to reenact an activist’s fantasy about Paris ’68.

Try Mississippi in the fifties instead. Reenact Flint, Michigan, circa 1937 and you could get somewhere. Look to Omaha, 1892, and things could work out differently.

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