

## IS THIS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE?

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Occupy Wall Street (OWS) has given the consensus decision-making process a new lease on life by introducing the procedure to a new generation of organizers as well as thousands of older activists. Unfortunately, OWS also seems to have revived a variety of confusions and debates about the power and the significance of consensus that have tripped up earlier progressive and radical social justice efforts. Although the constellation of Occupy encampments established in the fall of 2011 were largely dismantled by the New Year, Occupy remains a diffuse and evolving political effort that, at the time of this writing, has begun to reclaim public attention through self-organized disaster relief efforts in response to Hurricane Sandy, and a campaign to buy and then discharge housing, educational, and health care-related debt (“Rolling Jubilee”).

While acknowledging that these latest iterations of the Occupy movement are adapting the use of consensus in productive ways, I focus here on the impact consensus decision making had on shaping the national Occupy movement during its first year. I examine the historical development and the symbolic significance of consensus to suggest that process is a tension point that reveals significant differences in vision and strategy among sectors of the US Left. I argue that to create movements that can win real changes in the world, thoughtful organizers need to carefully delineate what consensus can and cannot do, and distinguish between its positive and negative aspects.

### What Consensus Is

In general, the word “consensus” means that all parties involved in discussing a topic or making a decision have reached agreement or come to accept the same opinion. Beginning with Quaker-related organizations in the 1940s, progressive and radical social movements in the United States (and elsewhere in the world) have developed a host of procedures intended to help participants in movement organizations, campaigns, and counter-institutions arrive at agreement about the direction these initiatives should take. This evolving toolkit is often referred to as “consensus process” in movement shorthand. The consensus-seeking method has been especially useful for smaller groups, efforts dependent only on self-selecting participants, and political projects in which participants share similar values, visions, and levels of experience. Groups of activists who staff infoshops (non-profit bookstores and community centers), edit alternative newspapers, or participate in campus-based organizations, to cite a few examples, have honed consensus process to their particular needs, often finding that it serves as an orderly method of running meetings that promotes the active engagement of everyone involved. Since the mid-1970s, consensus process has also served as a useful tool for coordinating large-scale direct actions such as occupations and blockades that depend on the collaboration of committed activists from different parts of the country who may have never before worked with one another.

In the early days of OWS (and the related occupations it inspired in cities throughout the country), experienced organizers encouraged participants to set the direction of the movement collectively, and taught participants many of the procedural elements of consensus, such as the order in which conversation should flow, the role of a facilitator, and the use of hand signals to efficiently indicate the opinions and concerns of participants. Consensus process seems to have affected OWS in a variety of ways, both positive and negative. Manissa Maharawal, active in the occupation of Zuccotti Park, told Al-Jazeera, “If you’re going to join Occupy, you have to get on board with horizontal decision-making. In my mind it’s the reason why this thing has grown so much. Its structure is what allows it to be something that is fairly inclusive.”<sup>1</sup> The fact that anyone who showed up could help set the direction of the movement provided a sense of excitement missing from the highly scripted, pre-planned protest events typical of many unions and progressive organizations. The use of a General Assembly (GA), in which all participants could democratically shape movement policy in open meetings, linked the action

recent popular upheavals in Egypt and Spain, while the procedural aspects of consensus harkened back to the global justice movement of the early 2000s and brought some order to the chaos of thousands of strangers suddenly trying to communicate their political desires with one another. <sup>2</sup>

While consensus seems to have helped keep participants involved in the New York occupation, that was not the case everywhere. A sympathetic observer of the Los Angeles iteration of the movement noted that, “three weeks into the occupation, the group was spending more time discussing its own process than anything else—a messy issue that looms as a big threat to the L.A. movement.” <sup>3</sup> Occupy L.A.’s difficulty with making fairly basic decisions led to tension and a loss of momentum that discouraged potential recruits. This tendency for consensus to “go meta”—turning into a circular loop of people trying to reach consensus about how consensus decisions should be achieved—has dogged the practice for years.

Other critics suggest that a singular commitment to using consensus can foreclose options for movements that might contribute to their success. This tendency can be glimpsed anecdotally in the explanation one participant gave for OWS’ refusal to participate in electoral politics: “As a community that works with consensus with a 90 percent threshold, we’d never be able to build consensus around a single candidate—ever.” <sup>4</sup> Here a commitment to consensus takes precedent over many other concerns. While there are good reasons to doubt the usefulness of an electoral strategy for OWS, it is striking that a strategic option is taken off the table based on the assumption that the current decision-making procedure would preclude it. Consensus, a method purportedly adopted in order to best promote consideration of all options and to draw people into the movement, was by June pre-empting such consideration.

This is not to suggest that declining participation in OWS should be attributed primarily to the movement’s use of consensus, or that these challenges permanently immobilized participants. Occupy Sandy and other efforts demonstrate that organizers have begun using consensus more strategically, and in combination with a variety of other decision-making methods, while delegating to working groups many tasks previously handled in General Assemblies. Nonetheless, I *am* arguing that during the first year of the movement, consensus became a defining term in understandings of OWS offered the press and by participants themselves.

In these accounts, “consensus” has come to stand in for something much more significant than a set of manners to follow during meetings. The narrator of Al-Jazeera’s *Fault Lines* program on OWS explained, “Activists sought to build a movement that reflected a new society they wished to see. Occupy Wall Street based itself on direct democracy, a process of consensus decision making, with no hierarchy.” An organizer interviewed for the program saw this process as key to “facilitat[ing] self-empowerment” of those joining a protest for the first time. To take another example, the tongue-in-cheek website [WhatTheHeckHasOccupyDoneSoFar.com](http://WhatTheHeckHasOccupyDoneSoFar.com) listed among other notable achievements, “Thousands of protesters have been educated on the consensus model of decision-making, a form of direct democracy pioneered by anarchists. Yes, anarchists.” <sup>5</sup> Likewise, the author of an article on consensus and OWS in *The Nation* magazine asserts that, “The anarchists’ way of operating was changing our very idea of what politics could be in the first place.” <sup>6</sup>

In these and similar statements, “consensus” operates as one term in a whole chain, or cloud, of associated concepts. That chain includes: participation, empowerment, horizontalism, direct democracy, participatory democracy, community, prefigurative politics, anarchism, and perhaps other terms as well. Because relatively little has been written about consensus, and because many learn the term and its practices in the excitement and chaos of moments of rapid social movement expansion, the meaning of these concepts are often conflated and their relationships to one another are blurred.

One result of this imprecision is that today the Left in the United States is once again debating if consensus is a tool (a technique helpful when applied in certain times and places), a goal (a better way of organizing social life), or both. Some thoughtful commentators, such as David Graeber and Cindy Milstein, have made some version of the claim: “Consensus both our ends and our means of struggle.” <sup>7</sup> Here consensus functions as a synecdoche—a part rhetorically standing in for a greater whole. In this case, the whole that consensus stands in for is a participatory, egalitarian, self-determining

movement, on the one hand, and, on the other, a society with the same characteristics.

But the term consensus has also grown to serve as an antonym to a whole range of social institutions and ways of behaving. Social movement organizations devoted to using consensus are often promoted as alternatives to organizations run by “democratic centralist” principles or parliamentary procedure, or those directed in nontransparent ways by anointe or self-appointed individuals. Most commonly these turn out be traditional Marxist parties, mainstream labor unions, and liberal nonprofit organizations, respectively. The commonality in these widely divergent forms of organization is that a subset of participants make decisions (by whatever method) that the remainder are strongly encouraged or required to follow. Advocates for consensus have often convincingly connected these organizational features to the difficulties these organizations have had achieving broad transformations in social life, though the drawbacks to consensus and “flat” organizational schemes are less scrutinized.

Many also see consensus process as an alternative to parliamentary procedure and majority-rule voting. Parliamentary procedure, or Robert’s Rules of Order, is accused of limiting open discussion by allowing procedural manipulation, while majority rule is said to override the opinions of sizeable minorities and foster a competitive mode of political debate. Final consensus is sometimes seen as an alternative to bourgeois representative democracy itself. In this case, the fact that everyone involved is encouraged to help make decisions is the quality that ties consensus to “direct democracy”—the process of making collective decisions without delegating power to representatives. The ideals of direct democracy have been especially compelling over the past year since a central charge of OWS is that elected political representatives have been corrupted by their dependence on the wealthy.

Collapsing the “means” and “ends” distinction, though, can lead to unrealistic assumptions about what is required to make far-reaching social change. One anonymous flier issued out of Zuccotti Park claimed, “Ultimately, our greatest threat was the fact that we established a self-contained functional community that did not rely on government, that operated on communitarian principles rather than greed, and that openly spoke about inequity.” This conception of embodying threat b example harkens back to utopian socialist strategies that thoroughly undervalued the importance of strategic organizing campaigns.

The use of consensus, then, has become such a hot-button issue because it goes directly to the questions, “What is the Left aiming to achieve?” and “What is the most realistic strategy for achieving this vision?” What looks to some like a mi procedural matter appears to others a question determining the fate of the struggle for social justice. To put it a different way, the consensus process has come to perform deep signifying work for many movement participants above and beyo the facilitating work that it accomplishes. For this reason, I believe OWS and other radical movements will be stunted unt they better understand and find more common ground regarding consensus. In order to see how these conceptual associations have developed, it is useful to review the means by which consensus historically rose to its current place o prominence in US social movements.

### **Where Consensus Comes From**

Though today it is most often associated with anarchism, the use of consensus in radical political organizations has root: in the religious beliefs and practices of the Society of Friends, better known as the Quakers. Quakers believe that God speaks to believers directly, or exists as an inner light within them, removing the need for clergy to interpret God’s will. Traditionally, Quakers worship by sitting together silently until a member of the congregation feels spiritually moved to sh: a message with the community. In church business meetings, participants take turns expressing ideas, and refrain from responding directly to one another; discussion continues until there is a sense that all participants share a general agreement about what is to be done. Quakers are invested in this often time-consuming protocol because they see the

process of reaching consensus as the practice of divining God's will.

Since pacifism and stewardship towards others are fundamental to their beliefs, Quakers pushed for conscientious objection legislation following World War I and were prominent in other liberal causes during the interwar years. Impressed by the collaborative and deliberative character of this approach, WWII-era liberal organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee and an early association of intentional communities adopted versions of Quaker consensus-seeking practices, stripped of their religious underpinnings. <sup>8</sup> It appears that the first radical political organization to adopt consensus as its internal decision-making process was Peacemakers, formed in 1948.

Peacemakers was an organization dedicated to revolutionary nonviolence that grew out of connections made between religiously motivated pacifists and anarchists, who were imprisoned together for resisting the draft during WWII, including notable figures such as Bayard Rustin and David Dellinger. Peacemakers sought to develop a new form of political organization that could serve as an alternative to the top-down centralism of the Communist Party and to liberal "membership organizations" that asked members only to pay dues and left day-to-day work to an executive committee or small paid staff. The group structured itself as a network of small cells that elected a steering committee, but operated autonomously from one another in pursuit of the organisation's defined goals. As historian Scott Bennett writes, Peacemakers hoped this experimental form of organisation "could challenge and eventually replace centralized, hierarchical institutions." <sup>9</sup> While Peacemakers never grew beyond a few hundred members, its members helped to relay the ethics of nonviolence and consensus to individuals and organizations central to the mid-century movement for African American civil rights, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

SNCC developed out of a wave of sit-ins organized by African American college students at segregated lunch counters and other facilities in the US South beginning in 1960. The historian Clayborne Carson explains that early SNCC activists "strongly opposed any hierarchy of authority such as existed in other civil rights organisations." <sup>10</sup> Ella Baker, an experienced organizer who helped found the organization, believed that the mark of a good leader was his or her ability to share responsibility and develop leadership capacities in others; accordingly she advocated "group-centred leadership." <sup>11</sup> Instead of carrying out a program designed by a few leaders, SNCC members engaged in long discussions in which those not used to speaking up were supported and gently urged to participate alongside the more loquacious, in an attempt to reach consensus on major programme and strategy decisions. This helped build the sense of trust and commitment among the group needed to engage in the potentially deadly work of trying to break the back of Jim Crow in the Deep South. Sociologist Francesca Polletta claims this way of operating also accrued to SNCC a "developmental benefit." <sup>12</sup> That is, people who previously had little experience speaking publicly or developing strategy gained skills and confidence through their active engagement in the group's inner workings. As SNCC shifted its energies from direct action against segregation to organising poor black men and women to register to vote, staff members such as Bob Moses sought ways to extend the process of perpetual leadership development beyond the organisation itself to all the people SNCC staff members worked with in voter registration efforts. In this way, SNCC developed in its day-to-day organising work an idea of local, grassroots democracy that demanded ordinary people be able to make the decisions that affect their lives.

In its early years, SNCC served as an important model for many of the white, middle-class, Northern college students who formed Students for a Democracy Society (SDS) in the early 1960s. SDS' famous founding document, "The Port Huron Statement," called for the creation of a "participatory democracy," defined as a social order in which "the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life." SDS developed an Economic Research and Action Program (ERAP) in which students moved to poor urban neighborhoods with the intention of facilitating organizing campaigns amongst the people living there. Many ERAP projects used consensus and hoped to build on SNCC's model: to encourage the latent capacities of the original residents, and serve as a resource, rather than to assert their own leadership and recruit the locals to follow. A New Jersey ERAP organizer argued, "It is important to make real what kind of society we want and we think is possible . . . the real power relationships in the society will become apparent as we crea

a new ‘counter-society.’” <sup>13</sup> The sociologist Wini Breines first coined the term “prefigurative politics” to describe this understanding of the process of change.

Beginning in the late 1960s, radical feminists launched a critique of male domination and male leadership styles in the civil rights and anti-war movements. Women involved in consciousness-raising groups, especially, suggested the possibility of nonhierarchical and “leaderless” organizations, which could make use of consensus. Though some participants famously noted that unofficial, and therefore less accountable leaders, typically emerged in such situations, <sup>14</sup> the concept of leaderless movements (rather than SNCC’s “group-centered leadership”) found traction especially in movements where establishing prefigurative, countercultural lifestyles and communities was deemed an important aspect of movement strategy. For example, The Movement for a New Society (MNS), initiated by radical Quakers in 1971, attempted to combine organizing campaigns that made use of nonviolent direct action with the development of counterinstitutions and intentional communities in which members could “live the revolution now.” <sup>15</sup>

MNS helped make consensus a defining feature of the radical antinuclear campaign of the 1970s and 1980s. <sup>16</sup> In 1976 more than 1400 people were arrested for occupying the site of a proposed nuclear power plant near the town of Seabrook, New Hampshire. MNS trained participants in the consensus method and in what they called the “small-to-large group decision making method”—what later became known as the “spokescouncil” model of coordinating affinity groups and working groups. Jailed for more than a week in a set of open armories, the arrestees were able to convene daily and make decisions, as a group, using consensus. Their successful collaboration built an intense sense of community among the participants in a manner similar to that experienced by many of those camping together during OWS. This experience of joyful cohabitation in medium-sized groups successfully coordinated through consensus has created an impulse among some participants to argue that pursuing such forms of community can, in itself, have a transformative impact on the wider world—as a model of a better way of living. <sup>17</sup> This was, and remains, a claim that has not been demonstrated historically.

Food Not Bombs grew out of the antinuclear movement in 1980 and became a vital conduit of consensus within antiauthoritarian circles over the next three decades. It adopted a decentralized network structure and the use of consensus, growing to hundreds of local chapters throughout the world. Food Not Bombs co-founder C. T. Butler helped systematize the process in publications such as *Conflict and Consensus*. <sup>18</sup> Food Not Bomb’s popularity with anarchists strengthened associations between consensus and anarchism during the same years that anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin was conceptualizing the possibility of more direct forms of democracy at the citywide level. <sup>19</sup> Earth First! and other radical environmental organizations likewise began to rely on consensus in the 1980s and 1990s—modifying it so that it was harder for infiltrators to hijack the process as a means of hindering the movement.

In 1999, tree-sitters from Earth First! and veterans of the antinuke movement collaborated with many other progressive forces to organize the infamous demonstrations and direct actions that shut down the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle and fired up the global justice movement of the early 2000s. The Seattle demonstrations uneasily united activists based in the US nonviolent direct action tradition with those taking cues from the Mexican Zapatistas and from European autonomous movements that tactically valued carnivalesque forms of protest, property destruction, and confrontation with police forces. <sup>20</sup> One result was that after Seattle, anarchists and sympathizers placed heavy emphasis on the use of consensus and horizontal forms of organizing while also insisting other activists accept the use of a “diversity of tactics,” which often included political rioting. It could be argued that this represented a corruption of the ideal of consensus, in that the goal of reaching and sticking to agreement on which tactics would best benefit the movement was abandoned.

In the series of mass actions and local organizing campaigns that came to be known as the global justice movement of the early 2000s, a common intramovement criticism was that the new wave of protest felt inhospitable to many activists of color or unintentionally excluded them in a variety of ways. Some analysts noted that white and nonwhite radicals and progressives frequently participated in (and built an identity from) social movement cultures based on different norms, including the significance placed on the consensus process. <sup>21</sup> As that movement began to wane, a variety of participant



debated ways in which a process meant to be inclusive might have served to distance potential allies from each other, at what discussions or compromises might instead cement those alliances. Though these issues were never fully resolved, the criticism seems to have become muted as horizontal forms of organizing began to spread to additional sectors and institutions of the Left, such as the committee organizing the US Social Forum, which was likely influenced by the “horizontalism” exhibited by movements of the Global South and incorporated into the structure of the World Social Forum

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Reviewing this admittedly partial and only partially digested history, we can begin to see how the use of consensus grew throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and how the significance attributed to it changed as it was taken up by different groups. For Quakers, consensus was a technique used amongst a bounded community of belief, as a means for discerning revealed truth. Peacemakers linked the practice to the search for new organizational forms that could bolster radical efforts in a conservative period and to Gandhi’s insistence on social justice movements setting a high moral standard and living in accordance with their beliefs. SNCC used consensus to critique forms of leadership that in some ways reproduced dynamics the movement was struggling against. They found using consensus could increase group solidarity and help members develop political skills. SDS announced participatory democracy as a political ideal, while expressing support for SNCC’s style of organizing, perhaps implying a causal link between participatory movement structures and the social order they sought to achieve. In MNS and sections of the women’s liberation and antinuclear movements, consensus again became associated with building countercultural communities and lifestyles. Participants hotly debated whether incubating progressive values in such communities was transformative or retreatist. Food Not Bombs linked consensus with the contemporary anarchist movement and presented it as a norm for a generation of antiauthoritarian radicals at a time when other sectors of the Left were weak. The Seattle demonstrations, and the global justice movement that arose in their wake, served to unfasten consensus from its nonviolent moorings. In OWS, consensus has melded with the process of mass General Assemblies of citizens and has become intimately associated with a faith in the concept of prefigurative politics. It is important to recognize that over the course of these seventy years, at least in some quarters, the belief that means and ends must be in accordance has been transformed from a moral responsibility, an empirical argument about which tactics generate the best results, to a sacred dictum that following the proper means guarantees the desired ends.

Rooting our understanding of consensus in the history of the organizations that have promoted its use helps us locate the particular times, places, and explanations in which the practice has taken on enlarged significance. It also encourages us to engage with critical assessments of consensus issued by those that have experimented with the procedure in the past which provide clarity regarding what the practice can and cannot contribute to social movements.

## **What Consensus Is Not**

### *Consensus Is Not a Perfect Method of Political Decision Making*

Former members of Movement for a New Society point towards two significant weaknesses in relying on consensus. First, the unanimity reached by following the process sometimes doesn’t amount to consensus, but only to agreement due to the attrition of those that disagree. Secondly, consensus has a built-in tendency towards stasis rather than change. If a group has been following one policy and it doesn’t seem to be working, they need to arrive at or near consensus regarding what to do differently. If they don’t reach that consensus, however, they will fall back into the old practice even if there is widespread agreement that it is not working. Another drawback to the process is that many versions of consensus make direct political debate difficult. When conversations proceed through a “stack” of speakers, they often jump erratically from topic to topic, which can confound sustained analysis of a crucial issue and prevent participants from exposing inaccuracies or logical fallacies in others’ positions.

### *Consensus Is Not the Model of Post-Revolutionary Self-Government*

Because consensus is often paired with a commitment to “prefigurative politics,” broadly defined, some people imagine that when movement organizations use consensus they are directly modeling the way social decisions will be made in general after our movements achieve their goals. This is naïve and a mistake. It is too simplistic to proclaim, “all decisions should be made by everyone” or “we should reach absolute agreement on every issue.” The development of OWS itself shows that even with a couple thousand people, relying on General Assemblies and consensus to make every decision become unwieldy, and leads fairly quickly to a greater appreciation of delegating responsibilities. While a participatory, egalitarian society will need different procedures for collectively arriving at decisions than our current system depends on, these will need to be considerably more complex than consensus as it is currently practiced in social movements.

### *Consensus Is Not a Strategy*

The myth of the transformative power of consensus is most dangerous when consensus is linked to leaderlessness, and leaderlessness is linked to the idea that prefiguring a new world is a political act that, in itself, has the power to bring that new world into being. The Right is continuously attempting to impose its will and values on the population at large. Certain tendencies on the Left have repeatedly scaled back their own ambitions to carving out small elective communities that practice expanded freedom and cooperation within their bounds, but which have little power to change external social relations. The sense of community that consensus builds among self-selecting activist practitioners cannot change the world on its own, and it often ends up distracting us from the work required to do so. Realistic strategies for making change need to be centered around actively changing ideas, touching consciences, and motivating action of and among millions of people who will not seek out the movement on their own.

### *Consensus Is a Tool for Movement Building, Not a First Principle of Politics*

It might be helpful to compare consensus to another popular symbol of OWS, the “people’s mic” (microphone). The people’s mic is a technique for members of large groups to communicate with one another without the use of electronic amplification: one person shouts out a phrase or short sentence, which is then repeated by those in hearing range, transmitting the message to participants further away. This technique can produce affective value beyond its practical utility, by requiring the group to act (speak) collaboratively. Watching footage from the early days of the Zuccotti Park occupation, one can see a flash of joy or inspiration in the eyes of many people using the technique. For the technocritics among us, the people’s mic perhaps even signifies the possibility of devising new ways to live and thrive without all the trappings of the digital world. Despite all this, it would be strange to say, “The people’s mic is our means and our ends.” The people’s mic is primarily a tool despite its symbolism. Likewise, consensus remains primarily a tool despite its symbolism. Therefore it should be deployed when useful, and abandoned when not. To hinge other movement decisions on whether they are compatible with consensus is to give the practice more significance than it deserves.

### **What Consensus Must Become**

If we are to win more victories for humanity, we need to articulate a clear and compelling vision of a better way of together organizing our lives. We also need to unite the disparate fragments of the Left as it exists today and learn how to attract and maintain the involvement of millions of people not currently involved in our movements. To do this we need to develop

more complex and realistic view of what consensus can and can't do. We need to de-fetishize it, so that we stop attributing powers and significance to it that have never been demonstrated in the actual practice of social movements.

It is note worthy that the term "consensus" has come to refer to three distinct, but related, things: the ideal or value of reaching near agreement or acceptance amongst movement or organization participants, a set of practices for structuring discussions and fielding proposals amongst diverse bodies of people, and an assumption that groups should seek to accommodate the beliefs or satisfy the desires of each constituent member. We might distinguish these as an ethic of agreement, an ethic of participation, and ethic of nonconflictual decision making. Differentiating between them allows us to judge the efficacy and importance of each ethic on its own merits and to test how functional each is to establishing democratic procedures that tend to result in more egalitarian outcomes. In doing so, we should note that democratic procedures for social movements and for societies-at-large will be different from one another, since more political agreement is bound to exist between comrades on the same side in a social struggle than is likely to exist amongst an entire, diverse polity. Being more realistic about consensus and about the much larger concept of direct democracy also means developing a multifaceted idea of freedom that includes the ability to participate in decisions that affect one's own life, as well as the freedom to spend one's limited amount of time doing things besides laboring to arrive at collective decisions.

To avoid some of the muddled strategic thinking that often accompanies an introduction to consensus, organizers must stop teaching consensus in a way that entrances activists into thinking that the quality of their intermovement conversations is alluring enough to revolutionize society by weight of example. Concretely, this means that they need to use and teach additional methods for making decisions in political work and help less-experienced activists determine when each are most useful. It appears that this is increasingly becoming the case in the recent efforts of Occupy working groups in New York City. Participant-ethnographers embedded in these efforts will provide a great service to future movements in creating careful accounts of the ways decision making and task delineation developed within the movement, and were justified politically, as the General Assemblies approached the limit of their utility.

Meanwhile, proponents of "direct democracy" need to devote energy to defining what this means in much more concrete terms, acknowledging the complexity of discerning popular will in contemporary societies. Some good starting points for this exist in the work of proponents of "deliberative democracy," communitarian political philosophers, and the ideas about radical democracy propounded by Cornelius Castoriadis, Chantal Mouffe, Enrique Dussel, and others.

In its first year, OWS directly and publicly raised the question as to whether our elite-dominated system of representative politics can make good on the political and social promises embedded in the concept of democracy. Participants and their philosophically minded allies now have to clarify their ideas about what a more deeply democratic society will look like, but they also have to build a strategic, tactically-, and organizationally-flexible movement that can improve the lives of millions of people, demonstrating in concrete terms—not just in theory—what it means to satisfy everyone's needs.

### Biographical Note

Andrew Cornell is a writer, organizer, and educator who teaches in the American Studies Program at Williams College in Massachusetts. He is the author of *Oppose and Propose! Lessons from Movement for a New Society* (AK Press, 2011) and he is completing a history of the US anarchist movement in the mid-twentieth century.

### Footnotes:

1. "History of an Occupation," *Al-Jazeera*, *Fault Lines*, March 21, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes>



[/faultlines/2012/03/2012319152516497374.html](#). ↩

2. The Zuccotti Park General Assembly, like many others, quickly adopted a 90 percent threshold of agreement as their standard rather than absolute consensus, leading participants to speak of modified consensus or horizontal decision making. ↩
3. Gene Maddeus, "Occupy L.A.'s Dilemma," *LA Weekly*, October 27, 2011, <http://www.laweekly.com/2011-10-27/news/occupy-la-s-dilemma/>. ↩
4. Chris Francescani, "Occupy Wall Street's Survival in Question as Donations Dry Up," *Huffington Post*, June 7, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/07/occupy-wall-street-survival\\_n\\_1576461.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/07/occupy-wall-street-survival_n_1576461.html). ↩
5. It is not true that anarchists invented consensus. However, anarchists have long been concerned with what their political vision implies about how they should structure their movements. And it is equally true that anarchists have been important in the development and popularization of consensus as political tool for more than sixty years. ↩
6. Nathan Schneider, ""Thank You, Anarchists,"" *The Nation*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.thenation.com/article/165240/thank-you-anarchists>. ↩
7. David Graeber, "The New Anarchists," *New Left Review* 13, (January–February 2002): 61–73; Cindy Milstein, *Anarchism and Its Aspirations* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2010). ↩
8. Ethan Mitchell, "Participation in Unanimous Decision-Making: The New England Monthly Meetings of Friends," *PHILICA.COM*, Article number 14 (2006), [http://www.philica.com/display\\_article.php?article\\_id=14](http://www.philica.com/display_article.php?article_id=14). ↩
9. Scott Bennett, *Radical Pacifism in America: The War Resisters League and Gandhian Nonviolence in America, 1915–1963* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 148–149. On Peacemakers, also see James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), and Marian Mollin, *Radical Pacifism in Modern America: Egalitarianism and Protest* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). ↩
10. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 30. ↩
11. Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 188–190. ↩
12. Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 55–87. See also Chris Crass, *Collective Liberation on My Mind* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2001). ↩
13. Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989). ↩
14. Most famously, Jo Freeman. See "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," available at: <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm> ↩
15. Andrew Cornell, *Oppose and Propose! Lessons from Movement for a New Society* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011). ↩
16. Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser, Christopher Moore, and Virginia Coover, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution. A Handbook of Skills and Tools for Social Change Activists* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1981). ↩
17. Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991). ↩
18. C. T. Butler and Amy Rothstein, *On Conflict and Consensus: A Handbook on Formal Consensus Decision-Making* (Tacoma Park, MD: Food Not Bombs Publishing, 1987), <http://www.ic.org/pnp/ocac/>. ↩
19. See, for instance, Janet Beihl and Murray Bookchin, *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997). ↩
20. Daniel Burton-Rose, Eddie Yuen, and George Katsiaficas, *Confronting Capitalism: Dispatches from a Global Movement* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2004). ↩

21. A widely read, early contribution to the discussion was Elizabeth Betita Martinez's, "Where Was the Color in Seattle: Looking for Reasons the Great Battle Was So White," *Color Lines: News for Action*, March 10, 2000, [http://colorlines.com/archives/2000/03/where\\_was\\_the\\_color\\_in\\_seattlelooking\\_for\\_reasons\\_why\\_the\\_great\\_battle\\_was\\_so\\_white.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2000/03/where_was_the_color_in_seattlelooking_for_reasons_why_the_great_battle_was_so_white.html). See also the archive at <http://www.coloursofresistance.org>; my contribution to the discussion, "Who Needs Ends When We've Got Such Bitchin' Means," is available at: <http://www.coloursofresistance.org/266/who-needs-ends-when-weve-got-such-bitchin-means/>. ↩
22. Marina Sitrin, *Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina* (London: Zed Books, 2012); Rau Zibechi, *Dispersing Power: Social Movements as Anti-State Forces*, trans. Ramor Ryan (Oakland, CA: AK Press 2010). ↩