

IS THIS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE?

Editor's Note: This interview was conducted on October 3, 2012, mere weeks before Hurricane Sandy made landfall near Atlantic City, New Jersey, bringing with it a widespread infrastructural crisis the likes of which the mid-Atlantic region has not witnessed in a generation or more. In New York City, and especially in some of the hardest-hit communities on Staten Island, and in Queens and Brooklyn, Occupy activists sprung into action, transferring the same organizational and mutual aid methods that had sustained the 2011 occupation of Zuccotti Park into a well-oiled disaster relief effort—Occupy Sandy—lending assistance and material support more swift and nimble than that provided by the Red Cross or FEMA. The storm also hit right as we were putting this dossier to bed, making it impossible to update this interview to reflect upon the implications of the Occupy Sandy effort. We nonetheless encourage readers to approach this interview with the latest Occupy efforts in mind. For those interested in supporting Occupy's ongoing efforts to promote mutual aid and to support those most devastated by Sandy, please visit <http://interoccupy.net/occupysandy>. — AJB

A. J. Bauer: *When Zuccotti Park was first occupied on September 17, 2011, few expected it to last longer than a day or so, let alone nearly three months. What challenges did Occupiers face as a result of this fortuitous temporal extension*

Michael Ralph: First, I think it's crucial to note that many people—from journalists, to pundits, to political science professors—had largely written off the post-civil rights generation as largely apathetic. It was construed as a post-social movement generation, one more concerned with blogging than with any form of activism or civil disobedience. In fact, the question many expert analysts of politics would often ask was not “if” or “how” young people today are political but “why” they are not.

Occupy Wall Street (OWS), like the uprisings across Africa and southwest Asia termed the “Arab Spring,” exposed this fallacy. Instead, we see careful, thoughtful, strategic young people with a sophisticated critique of finance capital, governance, and various dimensions of injustice. We also see a different approach to politics than what many people are accustomed to seeing. It's a style of politics defined by dwelling in—or occupying—a space as a means of direct action. In a sense, this strategy borrows from various social movements, including the civil rights movement with its sit-ins and university building takeovers. In another sense, the forms of civil disobedience that OWS developed had a broader temporal window. They were meant to endure, without any fixed end point, which is an impressive—and important—innovation. But this kind of resistance strategy, an encampment, forces one to grapple with the question of infrastruc-

AB: *Media coverage of the Zuccotti Park Occupation tended to highlight the park's kitchen and library services, and often mentioned the protestors' use of restroom facilities at nearby commercial businesses. What other infrastructural concerns were faced by the Occupiers? And how did they address them?*

MR: Well, since the Zuccotti, or Liberty, Park encampment was meant to endure, it would necessarily involve the participation of area residents and neighboring franchises. This doesn't mean that everyone supported OWS. They didn't. But many people did, otherwise what happened in Zuccotti Park would not have been possible.

Examining OWS through the lens of infrastructure is helpful for appreciating the way that people from different walks of life and with different levels of expertise, worked together. One of the key infrastructure concerns involved securing power sources—generators. Some people produced funds to purchase them, others with technical expertise repaired and maintained them, and everyone benefited from them. The question of power, in this strict sense, actually reminds me of something Che Guevara wrote in *Handbook for Guerilla Warfare* about the Cuban Revolution. He said that at every encampment they made during the liberation struggle against Fulgencio Batista, they built a power plant, a hospital, and a library. I always wondered where they ate. But, I assume the hospital is not merely for treatment but for health and healing—for wellness—so maybe the hospital featured a canteen.

Likewise at OWS, there was a cafeteria, of sorts, to feed people, as well as a kind of hospital, where people could receive medical attention. One of the most remarkable dynamics associated with OWS, of course, had to do with the scores of homeless people who slept in Zuccotti Park, or the hungry people who ate there, and the people in need of medical attention who were treated there. In all these ways, the movement embodied the principles it sought to promote—literally sometimes: one of OWS' most impressive innovations was the "People's Mic," where members of the audience echo and thus transmit the speaker's address, passing it outward, replacing the need for audio equipment while forging a concrete sense of community.

AB: *You are suggesting that we use 'infrastructure' as a lens for making sense of OWS. But, that term often evokes massive public works—the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System or the Tennessee Valley Authority come to mind. What are the implications of the more microconception of infrastructure suggested in practice by Occupy? And what role did infrastructural concerns play in shaping the broader political dynamics and demands of the Occupation of Zuccotti Park?*

MR: It's interesting to me to see how hotly contested the question of infrastructure is today when so many of the United States' most impressive achievements are linked to developments in the sphere of infrastructure. As you mentioned, the birth of a national highway system enabled people to travel across the country more easily for family, work, and leisure, and to provide assistance to others. So, it's at first strange to see Republican legislators block efforts by the Obama administration to develop a national railway system. But then, it's worth noting that infrastructure can also connect people. So, while a better railway system would make it easier for people who most need jobs to access them, it would also make easier for them to live in neighborhoods presently inaccessible to them, which is an idea that makes some people uncomfortable.

But whether infrastructure is national or local, it is concerned with how resources are cultivated and shared, how technologies are built and installed. These issues are intensely political. In Mitt Romney's leaked speech from a private gathering with fundraisers he declared—with a disdain that was discernable—nearly half of all Americans "believe government has a responsibility to care for them . . . believe that they're entitled to healthcare, to food, to housing..." That was precisely the spirit of Zuccotti Park. It just wasn't motivated by rage at people who supposedly leech off of others. Instead, the sense was that governance is in part concerned with assisting people if and when they need it. But members of any given community are also expected to give what they can when they can, as people routinely did. In this way, I think people sought to craft a political vision even if it didn't always take the shape of explicit, concrete demands.

AB: *It could surely be argued that infrastructural concerns—sanitation and electrification for example—crucially shaped the Occupation of Zuccotti Park. But what are the infrastructural stakes in a post-Zuccotti movement? That is, to what extent are questions of infrastructure still pertinent as the movement reverberates beyond the spatial boundaries of physical occupation?*

MR: I think OWS has done a lot to address the question of infrastructure even after people were ousted from Zuccotti Park. First, there has been a lot of attention to foreclosure, to the fact that people were often unjustly kicked out of their homes even when banks could not produce adequate documentation. People have also assembled around questions of medical access and treatment, especially reproductive rights. In its stress on the dangers of escalating inequality, I think OWS has done a lot to help people appreciate that reproductive rights cannot be reduced to political and moral debates. Controlling reproduction is central to a woman's capacity for work, in the same way that cheap, affordable healthcare is a precondition for economic mobility. Critics of President Obama would, during the first few years of his presidency, often complain that he was focusing so much attention on trying to make health care more affordable and efficient rather than directing his attention to employment rates without apparently realizing that no one who is seriously injured or dead can work.

AB: *In post-Zuccotti activities of the Occupy movement, like those on May Day 2012, former park services (like the librarians and medics) tended to pop up under the name 'Mutual Aid,' which has a long history in the anarchist tradition upon which Occupy draws. But mutual aid is also the kind of practice that people revert to in the wake of state or societal breakdowns, such as during times of natural or manmade disaster. Insofar as the Occupy movement might be said to be a response to the disaster of finance capitalism, might the movement's advocacy of mutual aid be read in light of its response to disaster? Further, what is the relationship between the concept of mutual aid and the Occupy conception of infrastructure? And how does the Occupy conception of infrastructure or mutual aid relate to questions of social justice*

MR: My colleague at Occupy the SEC, Alexis Goldstein, appeared on the MSNBC show *Up with Chris Hayes* on September 23, 2012, where she suggested that OWS seeks to incite a "society of care." Others, as you noted, routinely describe practices associated with OWS using the language of "mutual aid." In my view, this is one of the most devastating—and insightful—critiques of reckless financialization that has yet been articulated in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis of 2006 and the global economic crisis of 2008 until the present.

The modern insurance industry modeled itself on the idea of "mutual aid," on the kind of support that people have provided to their neighbors, friends, and kinfolk since the earliest human societies on record. We often associate "mutual aid" societies with peoples who share ethnic and religious affiliations, or with immigrant community centers where people banded together around shared histories and heritages and forms of trauma, and pay dues to pool resources. But, many rural communities in the U.S. used this kind of system before the rampant industrialization and urbanization of the first few decades of the nineteenth century. As people moved to urban centers in search of work leaving behind the community and family networks upon which they had historically relied, different kinds of insurance—perhaps most notably, life insurance—emerged as a supposed substitute. The problem is that while a family network and an insurance policy can—each in its own way—be said to provide security for a person, they often operate at cross-purposes. A club or mutual aid society often dedicates itself to helping a member, drawing upon past dues yet also bleeding members for additional contributions when existing funds are insufficient to pay for a medical treatment or to make funeral preparations. By contrast, insurance companies routinely commission teams of lawyers so they can *avoid* paying out. Executives are frequently offered bonuses based on a proven record of denying payment to clients.

So, in framing OWS as a "society of care" or "mutual aid," adherents to this critical-political project are drawing upon a long-standing tradition of providing support and security to their comrades and fellow citizens, while rejecting the idea that access to resources and quality care should be determined by wealth or status or mediated by a profit motive.

You were also asking about the connection between infrastructure and mutual aid, but here I think it's striking to see the many instances in which financial mechanisms like insurance are presented as a solution to problems of infrastructure. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many observers suggested that the residents of New Orleans were themselves to

blame for living in a hurricane-prone region without adequate insurance coverage. In fact, many Gulf Coast residents did have hurricane insurance. Yet, underwriters had argued that it was the flood caused by breached levees and not the hurricane that had damaged their homes and destroyed their possessions. Thus, even if you had hurricane insurance, you could not collect. Later, an analysis revealed that there was not even enough flood insurance available to cover the vast majority of people victimized by Hurricane Katrina. So, the financial mechanism is a poor substitute for elements of infrastructure like sound levees.

In a related effort to propose a financial mechanism as a substitute for infrastructure, *The Economist* ran an article in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti where it recommended catastrophe insurance as the best option for a developing country made ever more vulnerable by a natural disaster—catastrophe insurance rather than accessible roads and adequate healthcare facilities.

AB: *What lessons are to be drawn from the Occupy approach to infrastructure and mutual aid, both for the future of political organizing and for the future of the broader polity?*

MR: I think one of Occupy's greatest successes lies in encouraging people to embrace the idea of a "society of care," a "society of mutual aid." This idea is related—yet probably superior—to the idea of the "welfare state." The welfare state's great accomplishments included financial regulation, greater benefits for workers, and social insurance in the form of Social Security. But conservative critics frequently lambaste the "welfare state" as a form of "big government." This is, of course empirically inaccurate because Republican presidents promote more spending and have proven less adept at managing the national deficit than Democratic presidents. But, this idea of the "welfare state" as a more expensive enterprise than the post-welfare state—an idea that progressives often subscribe to, even if they support it—is also historically inaccurate since it was not the New Deal state that created the template for what we now think of as "big government" but the wartime government associated with the Second World War. That was the first time that Americans enabled the state to spend at an exorbitant rate with very little accountability. There's an intriguing parallel in the post-9/11 state, with its ever-expanding bureaucracy of intelligence experts despite severely diminished returns on what taxpayers get for that information if the September 11, 2012 attack on the US embassy in Benghazi, Libya is any indication and I think it is.

At any rate, I think the biggest lesson to be drawn involves a steadfast commitment to the "society of care," one that includes the best programs and practices of "mutual aid societies," of the "welfare state" and the "Great Society" and yet seeks to improve upon them all.

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