

The international roots of the 99% and the “politics of anyone”

Las raíces internacionales del 99% y la “política de cualquiera”

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Abstract

Since the earliest days of Occupy Wall Street, the mainstream American media has presented the movement as a ragtag bunch of protestors struggling to find a purpose, while those sympathetic to Occupy have focused on the way a group of American organizers captured the public imagination. This article offers an alternative narrative of the origins of Occupy Wall Street. Based on participant observation and an analysis of documents, it argues that international participants with experience in recent social movements around the world contributed some of Occupy's most persuasive ideas. It tells the story of how a Spanish contingent within Occupy helped to articulate the iconic “We are the 99%” slogan by translating a principle of inclusivity from the 15-M orindignado movement in Spain.

Resumen

Desde los primeros días de Occupy Wall Street, los principales medios norteamericanos presentaron al movimiento como un grupo marginal de manifestantes al que costaba trabajo encontrar un propósito; mientras, otros simpatizantes con Occupy se centraron en la forma en la que un grupo de organizadores estadounidenses captaron la atención del público. El presente artículo ofrece un discurso alternativo sobre los orígenes de Occupy Wall Street. Basado en la observación de los participantes y en el análisis documental, se defiende la tesis de que un grupo de participantes internacionales, con experiencia en movimientos sociales recientes en distintas partes del mundo, contribuyeron a conformar algunas de las ideas más persuasivas de Occupy. En concreto, cuenta la historia de cómo el contingente español de Occupy ayudó a articular el icónico eslogan “Somos el 99%” que reflejaba el principio de inclusividad del movimiento 15M en España.

Keywords

Occupy Wall Street, 15-M, indignado, social movements, inclusivity

Palabras clave

Occupy Wall Street, 15M, indignados, movimientos sociales, inclusividad

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Sumario

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On September 19th, 2011, Luis Moreno-Caballud and Begoña Santa-Cecilia returned to their apartment after three days of intense discussions and assemblies in New York City's Zuccotti Park. As members of Occupy Wall Street's original Outreach Committee, they were frustrated by what he had seen in the park since the beginning of the occupation on September 17th. They had imagined that the encampment in the heart of Wall Street would be something like the *acampadas* they had seen in Spain earlier that year, large open tent camps in public plazas where diverse groups of people had congregated. Yet it still wasn't happening. Zuccotti Park was ringed by police vans, protestors in bandannas yelled at officers and passerbys from the sidewalk, and the assemblies themselves had become fractious. They decided to send an email to the Outreach Committee, the "working-group" responsible for communicating Occupy's message to the outside world, to propose a change in tactics.

The aim of the email was simple. Occupy needed to emphasize that it wasn't just another demonstration of protestors violently decrying the "system," but a movement that was creating a physical and conceptual space where people could come together to talk and to listen and to formulate alternative solutions to the global economic and political crisis. Rereading emails and thinking back over assembly debates, they revived a slogan that had been formulated through collective process in the days leading up to the occupation: "We Are the 99%." Moreno-Caballud sent the email with the subject line "#OccupyWallStreet stays alive by becoming #WeAreThe99%":

It looks like #OccupyWallStreet is in urgent need of a massive and targeted outreach operation to stay alive. The key to the success of the movement is to be inclusive. Right now the movement is too homogenous, due to the 'activist' imaginary and language identified with it...I propose that we start today a fast and massive outreach campaign with this idea: #WeAreThe99%. This is the plan: we put all our energy and resources in outreaching for the #WeAreThe99% Day which will happen next Saturday 23rd, at our space in Zucotti/Liberty Park.¹

Two days later, Justin Molito, another member of Outreach, began to print flyers. By that weekend, the 99% campaign was on the ground and #WeAreThe99% became a trending topic on Twitter, and within two weeks, encampments had gone up in more than fifty cities in the United States. "We Are the 99%" was being chanted around the country, then around the world. The 99% movement had gone global.

It is helpful to pause for a moment to recall just how deeply the "We are the 99%" slogan became ingrained in the American national consciousness

1 Luis Moreno-Caballud. Email to september17@googlegroups.com. "#OccupyWallStreet stays alive by becoming #WeAreThe99%." 9/9/2011.

during the months of October and November, 2011. Perhaps we are still too close to those “Occupy months” to fully comprehend how, in a country that prides itself on speaking to and for the middle-class, the rhetoric of the 99% and the 1% reconfigured our political vocabulary. Indeed, it seems plausible to believe that ten years down the line, those months will be seen as the turning point in the buildup to the 2012 US presidential election—when a beleaguered Barack Obama, reeling from the disastrous results of the 2010 midterm elections and a poor performance in the debt ceiling showdown with congressional Republicans, was finally able to strike something of a populist note. How ironic that it was a Spaniard who had sent the email. So how did it happen?

There are a lot of misconceptions about the history of the Occupy movement in the United States. Since the earliest days of Occupy Wall Street, when *The New York Times* reporter Gina Belafonte referred to the Zuccotti Park encampment as “political protest as spectacle,” the mainstream American media has largely presented Occupy as a ragtag group of dissatisfied individuals struggling to find a purpose. At the same time, those sympathetic to Occupy Wall Street have often given an account of the movement’s origins that revolves around the activities of a cluster of American organizers who somehow managed to capture the public imagination. This is a different narrative of Occupy Wall Street. It is a story about how a group of foreigners who brought tactics and experience from recent social movements in other countries articulated some of the most persuasive ideas and lasting practices to come out of the Occupy movement.

1. The International Participants of Occupy Wall Street

From August 13th to September 10th, 2011, I attended gatherings of the New York City General Assembly (NYCGA) in Manhattan’s Tompkins Square Park. At these weekly “general assemblies,” which were open to anyone who wanted to join, a group of about fifty or sixty people planned the September 17th encampment in and occupation of Wall Street. I was therefore a witness to the prehistory of Occupy Wall Street—though admittedly less out of conviction than curiosity. Up to that point, I probably would have labeled myself as a member of the “distracted” left—someone who had spent time and effort in various political and community initiatives without fully feeling (or being held) accountable to these causes. The NYCGA was a wake-up call for me, but since I did not yet feel comfortable intervening in the actual debates and tactical deliberations, I would discuss my views with participants only before and after the assemblies. Because I tended to hang out on the outer circle of these small gatherings, I was able to get a sense of the assembly dynamic that few of the more active participants could themselves afford. Although I have continued to participate in Occupy assemblies,

working groups, and events over the year and a half, I have mostly remained on the fringes of the movement. This position both in and out of the game has led me to realize the degree to which much of the history of the NYCGA is still unknown.

The standard mainstream narrative of Occupy Wall Street has presented it as a homegrown movement spurred by outrage over the abuses of the politico-financial elite, an American story in which “we” finally woke up to the dire conditions in “our” country. Even those articles that have recognized Occupy’s international connections have usually characterized them in terms of “inspiration by” the earlier social movements of 2011 in Egypt, Greece, Spain and elsewhere.² Yet what I saw at these gatherings, and what I have been able to reconstruct by looking at the early documents of the NYCGA, is that about 40% to 50% of the participants in the assemblies in August and September of 2011 were from places other than the United States: Spain, Brazil, Iran, Greece, Armenia, Japan, India, Palestine, Argentina, Russia, and Italy, as well as the Choctaw nation and Puerto Rico. Only one media piece in the first month of Occupy Wall Street focused exclusively on the international roots of the movement, Andy Kroll’s October 17th *Mother Jones* article, “How Occupy Wall Street Really Got Started.” As far as I can tell, his provocative but legitimate claim that foreign participants were at least as important as Americans in the organization of Occupy Wall Street was not seriously taken up anywhere else.

Perhaps more surprising to me has been the way that prominent intellectuals on the left and many within the movement itself began to rehearse this narrative of indirect inspiration rather than direct participation once Occupy went global. Contrary to what one might expect, the leading academic theorists of Occupy have relied heavily on media accounts of its origins, even as they have played up the international rather than the domestic thrust of the movement and lionized what the press has tended to demonize. I squirmed in my seat as the American academic and political theorist Michael Hardt elaborated the “invisible continuities” of the new social movements in a talk on “The Right to the Commons” at Princeton University in November of 2012, as if Occupy could only be connected to Madrid and Athens through analogy. In their now-famous “Declaration” of May, 2012, Hardt and Antonio Negri use almost exactly the same metaphoric language as the mainstream media in describing the 2011 social movements: encampments “took inspiration” from revolts, Wall Street occupiers “took the baton” from European demonstrators, and protestors around the world “recognized resonance.”³ In their insistence on attributing the movements around the world to a faceless, nameless, rhizomatic “multitude,” Hardt and Negri act as if none of the protestors could get on a plane. For materialist historians, doesn’t it make a difference that foreign participants in these movements were involved *actually* as well as *virtually*?

My goal here, however, is not simply to recuperate the significance of the international participants. From the first days of the NYCGA and the organization of

2 The few press articles that mention foreigners in the movement assign them an ornamental rather than a fundamental role, and Occupy’s international connections are vouchsafed in the experiences of Americans who had witnessed protest movements abroad, the so-called “cultural translators.”

3 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. “Declaration.” 5/12/2012. www.antonionegrienglish.com. Accessed 1/2/2013.

Occupy Wall Street, there were different internal visions of the movement's aims. Paradoxically, while most interpretations of Occupy have tended to marginalize the foreign voices in the movement, these foreign voices are the ones that have resonated most profoundly with people in the United States –and then around the world. By telling the story of the international participants, I hope to offer some possibilities for the future of the current wave of social movements that are latent in these forgotten actors in Occupy's history. I focus on the Spanish contributors to Occupy Wall Street, because I believe that their ideas and practices were absolutely crucial to the nascent phases of the movement –the Spanish contingent often made up between ten and twenty percent of the participants in these small organizational assemblies– and because I saw these practices up close. Like Moreno-Caballud and Santa-Cecilia, many of the Spaniards had recently returned from Spain after participating in the *indignado* or May 15th (15-M) movement, which was launched on May 15th, 2011 with a nationwide demonstration against corruption among the Spanish political and financial elites and led to the construction of encampments (*acampadas*) in major squares across the country. By July, 2011, 15-M had achieved an 80% approval rate among Spanish citizens, and current estimates suggest that the movement has succeeded in attracting six to eight million people to the encampments in Madrid, Barcelona and various other cities and towns.⁴ In addition to the convictions borne of having just witnessed this truly popular movement, the Spanish contingent of Occupy brought an important principle that had been forged in the crucible of the *acampadas*.

This principle was what the Spanish contingent began to call “the politics of anyone,” (*la política de cualquiera*), the belief that social movements should be composed of everyone who wants to participate. Although “horizontality” emerged in the autonomist and anti-globalization movements of the 1980's and 1990's as a keyword for the consensus-building structure of popular assemblies, the Spanish conception of Occupy was oriented less toward the activities of those internal to these gatherings –“autonomous” groupings engaged in “direct action”– than toward ordinary people outside of the assembly. They were more concerned, that is, with the *inclusivity* than the *horizontality* of the movement. For them, a “leaderless” movement was important not only because it established a protocol for non-hierarchical assemblies, but also because it blurred the lines between those on the inside and those outside of the movement. The Spanish contingent often repeated the phrase, “We care less about Occupy than what Occupy is generating [*lo que Occupy genera*].” They were deeply impressed by the way that activists in 15-M had ceded authority and agency to newcomers just arriving at the *acampadas*, and they were adamant about the need to frame the movement's message so that non-activist and non-academics could understand it. Corollary to this belief, the Spanish contingent held that the encampment of Wall Street should not only be the site of a protest against the excesses of American financial institutions but also, and even more fundamentally, a construction

4 See “El 15-M tiene el apoyo de más del 80% de los ciudadanos,” 6/6/2011. *La Nueva España*. <http://www.lne.es/espana/2011/06/06/15-m-apoyo-80-ciudadanos/1085489.html>.

site for an alternative society in which cooperation and mutual support would substitute for economic competition. In many ways, this idea was consistent with the principles of self-organization outlined by fellow NYCGA participant now iconic article that originally appeared in *The Guardian* on November 11, 2011, later republished as “Occupy Wall Street’s Anarchist Roots.”⁵ Graeber, perhaps the most visible face of the Occupy movement, has been one of the few activists to recognize the contributions of the Spanish *indignados* and other international participants in the creation of Occupy Wall Street. Yet Graeber’s recent account of the movement in *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement* focuses heavily on the anarchist process of the assemblies, thus downplaying the initial fears, repeatedly voiced by the Spaniards and others during these gatherings, that an exaggerated emphasis on the internal dynamics of the assembly would create an isolated radical community rather than an inclusive movement. From my perspective, the success of the organization of Occupy Wall Street by the NYCGA owed much to the powerful combination—one could just as easily say the productive tension—between those working primarily inside and those looking primarily outside of the assemblies.

I find it difficult to render such principles on paper, since so much of the efficacy of the Spanish contingent of Occupy resided in how they said what they said and how they did what they did. I remember one American commenting in quasi-religious terms of the “unshakeable faith” of the Spaniards, and another (a little less enthusiastically) mentioning the fact that he was one of the few people in the NYCGA, foreign or American-born, who did not speak Spanish. Of course, such personal anecdotes often give a skewed impression of the multiple meanings, sources, and interpretations of political events. These views are, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz might have said, as much interpretation as observation. Yet I am equally aware that the type of global theorizing about Occupy that Hardt and Negri have offered tends to flatten out the complicated trajectories and contingencies of social movements. I was only partially reassured in speaking to Hardt after the talk at Princeton when he said he was aware of this international presence in the prehistory of Occupy, but only “anecdotally.” Indeed, one of the more pressing concerns for anyone who wants to understand Occupy is precisely how to relate the vast scale of the new social movements with the growing sense that they are an expression of the crises we are living with from day to day. It is for that reason, I believe, that we need to be open to exploring alternatives to both abstract theorizing and typical journalistic reconstructions of the movement that tend to elevate the anecdotal by zeroing in on the picturesque detail, the “scariest dude in the encampment” interview, or the dramatic parry-and-thrust of militant exchanges. I will therefore combine personal observations with analysis, reflecting not just on the movement’s central concepts but also on how and when these ideas were (or were not) put into practice.

5 David Graeber, “Occupy Wall Street’s Anarchist Roots,” 11/30/2011. *Al Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011112872835904508.html>.

2. Occupy Loves 15-M

The transit of people and ideas between Spain and the United States in the summer of 2011 generated much of the energy that infused the organizational efforts of the Occupy movement that August and September. Of course, many different strains of protest and political thinking came together in the formation of Occupy Wall Street. The movement owed much to contemporary alter-globalization campaigns in Seattle and Argentina at the turn of the millennium, the pro-democratic protests from the Arab Spring that began to send shock waves throughout the West, and the call for American encampments in the dog days of 2011 from the Canadian culture-jamming magazine *Adbusters*. In July, the group New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts tested out the idea of a protest encampment in the United States with a small tent cluster called “Bloombergville” outside City Hall.

Even before these North American initiatives, however, the push for what would become the Occupy movement began in New York City during a solidarity demonstration with the Spanish 15-M movement in Washington Square Park on May 21st, 2011. Over the following six weeks, a group of Spaniards, most of them longtime New York residents, met weekly in the top floor of a tapas bar to strategize ways that a movement like the 15-M could be introduced into the United States. Cesar Arenas-Mena and Moreno-Caballud began to attend meetings of the New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts in mid-July, and on July 27th, an informational talk on 15-M was held at the Manhattan bookstore *Bluestockings* that addressed the small neighborhood assemblies in Spain as well as the more well-known *acampadas* in Madrid and Barcelona’s Plaza de Catalunya. The key moment of this early phase was a meeting on July 31st at an art and activist space in the heart of Wall Street, 16 Beaver, which was organized by Xavi Acarin, Moreno-Caballud, and the 16 Street Beaver members Ayreen Anasta and Rene Gabri. The meeting, called “For General Assemblies in Every Part of the World,” brought together participants from the *acampadas* in Spain and the *Syntagma* protests in Greece, as well as Japanese, Palestinian, and American activists and academics. At the end of the meeting, the first assembly of the NYCGA (at this point referred to as the People’s General Assembly on the Budget Cuts) was announced for August 2nd.

Over the next several days, Occupy’s most iconic and enduring phrase, “We are the 99%,” was molded by a number of participants in the NYCGA. The Spanish contingent was absolutely crucial to this articulation. On August 4th, an email thread on the newly-created “September 17th” Google Group, titled “A SINGLE DEMAND,” was initiated. One of the most fascinating aspects of this email thread is that it dispels the idea of the movement’s naiveté in eschewing a formal “demand” by showing how intensely and perceptively those within the movement debated the necessity of demands in the earliest phase of Occupy Wall Street. It also shows that the idea of Occupy Wall Street as a movement of the 99% was not “invented” whole cloth by a solo protestor, but was in fact patiently

formulated by many voices over time. In telling the story of the phrase's origin, then, I want to resist the temptation of trying to identify a kind of "first mover" while still documenting the concrete contributions of a wide range of people to the concept of the 99% movement.

Willie Osterweil, an American who spent several weeks in the *acampadas* in Barcelona before joining the NYCGA, initiated the "A SINGLE DEMAND" email thread by stressing that the demand would have to be broad enough to appeal to everyone: "We don't want observers, we want participants."⁶ Lorenzo Serna, a Latino member of the Outreach committee (who also spoke Spanish), responded by saying that perhaps what was needed was not a single demand but a single message, something that could "be easily transferrable from me, to someone else."⁷ Isham Christie then differentiated between a "demand," "that is directed at the state or economic elites," and a "message," "that is directed at the folks we are trying to bring into the movement."⁸ Crucially, the "online consensus" that was reached by the group was that the Occupy Wall Street movement needed to be defined less by *what* it wanted than *whom* it wanted to participate. Moreno-Caballud then suggested that the movement's identity would be defined by how easily its message was understood, and stressed that both the identity and the message would need to combine the political and the economic. Amin Husain added a populist inflection from the American Constitution, putting forth the slogan: "We, the people, are taking to the streets because the government is not hearing us."⁹ Finally, David Graeber picked up on the rhetoric of a May, 2011 article by the economist Joseph Stiglitz on the politics of the "1%," and perhaps an earlier elaboration of a 98% movement by the independent journalist David DeGraw. Graeber formulated the phrase that would become synonymous with Occupy: "What about the '99% movement.'" Graeber elaborated further:

Both parties govern in the name of the 1% of Americans who have received pretty much all the proceeds of economic growth, who are the only people completely recovered from the 2008 recession, who control the political system, who control almost, all financial wealth. So if both parties represent the 1%, we represent the 99% whose lives are essentially left out of the equation.¹⁰

The next day, Santa Cecilia and Moreno-Caballud printed out a flyer, adding the pronoun "we" to the 99%, thereby giving a "collective identity" to the anyone and everyone that would form part of the movement: "We, the 99% call for an open General Assembly Aug 9th 7:30 PM at the Potato Famine Memorial." The concept of the 99% began to circulate through the streets of New York. A few weeks later, the activist and blogger known as Chris transformed the slogan into its final form, creating a Tumblr page with the meme "We Are The 99%." These were

6 Willie Osterweil. Email to september17@googlegroups.com. "a SINGLE DEMAND for the occupation?" 9/2/2012.

7 Lorenzo Serna. Email to september17@googlegroups.com. "a SINGLE DEMAND for the occupation?" 9/2/2012.

8 Isham Christie. Email to september17@googlegroups.com. "a SINGLE DEMAND for the occupation?" 9/2/2012.

9 Amin Hussain. Email to september17@googlegroups.com. "a SINGLE DEMAND for the occupation?" 9/2/2012.

10 David Graeber. Email to september17@googlegroups.com. "a SINGLE DEMAND for the occupation?" 9/2/2012.

the words and the concept that Santa-Cecilia and Moreno-Caballud recuperated in their email in September during the first week of the encampment.¹¹

Although the single “message” of the 99% was the one constant that united the NYCGA participants from this August 4th email to the occupation of September 17th, the various contingents in the assembly had different ways of putting this into practice. It is no coincidence that the Spanish presence was strongest in the “Outreach” working group, which was charged with the task of further elaborating the assembly’s message and bringing it to those outside the movement. Of the roughly ten members that composed the Outreach group in August and early September, three were Spanish. In addition to Moreno-Caballud and Santa-Cecilia, Lauren Dapena Frais was also active in the group. I have to admit that when Moreno-Caballud and Santa-Cecilia, neither of whom is a US citizen, first told me in August about their plan to distribute the flyers outside subway stops in Brooklyn, I was worried for their safety. How would New Yorkers react to two Spanish people with thick accents urging them to attend meetings for an occupation of Wall Street? The Spanish contingent, however, persisted in their efforts, mainly because they believed, in the spirit of 15-M, that the movement should primarily be identified not with the assembly participants, protestors, or occupiers but with the entire population that is subject to manipulation by the politico-financial elite. During the assemblies in Tompkins Square Park, while much of the debate focused on the tactical and logistical questions of the occupation, Santa-Cecilia could often be found distributing flyers to curious onlookers who were passing through the park and talking to them about the rationale of Occupy. The idea was that the assembly needed to remain open to the 99% of the population that it considered to be the actual protagonist of the movement. In fact, though Moreno-Caballud and Santa-Cecilia ultimately decided to join the demonstrations and occupation on September 17th, they had serious reservations both with the imperial valences of the name “Occupy” and with the idea of constructing the encampment in “enemy territory.” Since they had spent much of their time in Spain in the smaller assemblies that had mushroomed in local communities after the eviction of the massive *acampadas* in Barcelona and Madrid, Santa-Cecilia and Moreno-Caballud continued to rally around the 99% slogan and proposed that efforts be made to construct and support local assemblies outside of New York’s financial district.

It strikes me as more than incidental that the group that most worried about and worked toward the inclusivity of the movement has been effectively excluded from the main narratives about Occupy’s origins. Why is this the case? In the first place, the 15-M was more drastic than the other 2011 movements in carrying the belief in a leaderless movement down to the organic level; those who were interviewed in the *acampadas* often refused to give more than just their first name, a practice that was initially replicated by the Spanish contingent of Occupy. Especially in the early days of the Zuccotti encampment, this tactic

¹¹ See David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement*, New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2013, p. 40-1.

of depersonalization was often met with confusion, hostility, or (more often) indifference by an American society that is heavily invested in the cult of celebrity. The lack of self-promotion by the Spanish contingent of Occupy meant that their visibility and influence in the movement slowly ebbed. By the time Occupy Wall Street captured the popular imagination in the last weeks of September, the Spaniards no longer had significant input into the main organs of the movement, either in Zuccotti Park or elsewhere. This shift confirmed, in part, the effectiveness of their concept of a movement of the 99%. On the other hand, the fact that they were less visible than other occupiers meant that the global media (and consequently academics and activists, since for all the rhetoric we continue to remain tied to narrow channels of information distribution) essentially ignored the continuities between 15-M and Occupy.

On May 1st, 2012, during a May Day march through the streets of Manhattan, a group of Occupy participants retroactively attempted to bridge the identities of the two movements. Worried that people in both the United States and Spain still saw Occupy as a homegrown movement focused on the American political systems, they carried a sign that said: "Occupy Loves 15-M (Spain)." I have pictures of Santa-Cecilia carrying the sign from Union Square down Broadway and all the way to Zuccotti Park, but I'm not sure how many others do. The sign bore witness to a certain kind of defeat. If it was true that many in Occupy "loved" 15-M, it had now become impossible to state the more encompassing truth: that 15-M was, or was a major part of, Occupy Wall Street.

3. Activists, Academics, and Anyone

One of the main characteristics that distinguished the Spanish contingent from the rest of the participants in the NYCGA is that most of the Spaniards in the movement had never been activists before the events of 2011. Like many other Spaniards at home and abroad, they were drawn to 15-M precisely because the language of the *acampadas* had cast away the traditional discourses of the left. Almost all of the Spanish members of the NYCGA had a postgraduate academic formation, yet all were captivated by the slogans and ideas coming out of the *acampadas* of the Spanish 15-M. Nearly everyone at the NYCGA assemblies was steeped in the radical political tradition, and had read everything from Marx and Franz Fanon to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, from Gayatri Spivak and Jacques Rancière to Hardt and Negri. The fundamental difference, in my view, was how the participants related to these political theorists. While most of the activists employed anti-capitalist rhetoric in almost every sentence they spoke, another group –represented in the "Single Demand" email by Lorenzo Serna, Isham Christie, and Moreno-Caballud– were

most concerned with how these ideas could be modified, reformulated, and translated into slogans that were “easy to understand.” Within the Spanish contingent, this desire to speak in common language often manifested itself in a deliberate refusal to identify as an intellectual, an activist, or an academic, even though several of the Spaniards held academic posts.

While it would be easy to label this refusal as hypocritical and misleading, the precariousness of their situation was quite real at that moment. In the early days of the NYCGA and Occupy, there were legitimate fears about government repression, particularly for those who were not US citizens. Perhaps even more importantly, the Spanish 15-M was already in the process of effectively reconfiguring the relationship between academics, activists and the rest of the population. Debates about the role of the intellectual in social movements go back from the British and American New Left to Gramsci, Lenin, and beyond, but they have acquired added urgency in the Spanish-speaking world in the wake of the guerrilla wars of the 1960’s and 1970’s, the Zapatista insurrection in the 1990’s and the recent populist movements in Latin America. Groups like Colectivo Situaciones in Buenos Aires, which began to combine organizational efforts and political militancy with research efforts after the 2001 financial crisis in Argentina, have attacked both the orthodox left and the academic establishment for an unwillingness to actually engage with the people about which they are writing. Following in the wake of these movements in the Spanish-speaking world, the 15-M was remarkable for the degree that the activists and academics in the movement, deliberately rejecting the traditional leftist notion of a revolutionary vanguard, took a back seat to the *indignados* who began to arrive at the *acampadas*.

This shift in Spanish thinking and practices on social movements was not, however, without its theorists. By far the most important for the Spanish contingent of Occupy was Amador Fernández-Savater, an independent writer and editor from Madrid who published a series of blog entries in May and June of 2011 titled “Apuntes de acampada sol” [Notes from the Encampment of Puerta del Sol]. Though Fernández-Savater is a long-time activist, his modes of thinking, writing, and engaging in political action changed drastically after several years of collaboration with victims of the 2004 bombing of the Atocha train station in Madrid. Fernández-Savater’s blog entries often took the form of brief phrases that he heard while walking around the *acampadas* (“Sin vivienda, no hay viviendo,” [Without houses to live in, there is no life] “Somos personas” [We are all People] followed by an elaboration of how these plain language utterances had come to express an alternative common sense within the movement. He tended to refer to himself as a *recogedor de citas*, a listener who compiled and glossed what other people were expressing in the plaza. In his first blog entry, Fernández-Savater reflected on the meaning of taking up these found words and phrases:

Discussion with a militant friend. He says that the language of the movement grates on him. He finds it lacking: “democracy,” “citizenship,” etc. I disagree. Beginning with “no a la guerra” [no to the war in Iraq], these types of “bare” statements are those that open up spaces in which we all fit and start to get things moving...it seems clearer every day that words acquire force not so much for what they say, but for who says them and where they say them.¹²

This attempt to find a language in which “everyone fits” was a hallmark of the Spanish contingent of Occupy.

One could say that the Spanish contingent’s emphasis on everyday language and ordinary people was nothing new, since the most significant theoretical currents over the past twenty years have championed the collective power of marginalized groups that don’t speak the idiom of the educated elite and often fall out of traditional “great man” histories. The emphasis on the anonymous and the marginal, reinvigorated by a renewed interest in Marxism after the global financial crisis of late 2007, can be seen in Hardt and Negri’s concept of the “multitude,” postcolonial studies on the “subaltern,” and Henry Lefevre and Michel de Certeau’s theories of the practices of everyday life.¹³ All of the Spaniards were familiar with these currents, and their words and writings were infused by the language of these writers. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Fernández-Savater’s project in the “Apuntes de Acampada Sol” was articulated in constant dialogue with Jacques Rancière’s belief in the “intellectual equality” of all people and Michel de Certeau’s insistence on “bringing scientific practices and language back toward their native land, everyday life.”¹⁴ Yet it would be a mistake to see the Spanish discourse as simply applying these theoretical principles, since what the 15-M managed to accomplish was in fact an inversion of what Rancière and de Certeau had set out to do. Instead of formulating a theory about everyday life and ordinary language, they put academic theories of practice *into practice* in the real world. In addition to translating the popular sentiments from the *acampadas* in Spain, the Spanish contingent of Occupy was also able to translate the intellectual contributions of a generation of theorists, many of whom were responding to the social movements of 1968, into the everyday idiom of the movements of 2011.

Perhaps the greatest lesson for Fernández-Savater in passage through the *acampadas* was that anonymity and facelessness were not the only means of combating the cult of individuality in contemporary society. In his introduction to the book *Las voces del 15-M*, posted on his blog on June 6th, 2011, Fernández-Savater offered an alternative to what he dubbed the practice of “radical anonymity.” Addressing the long line of literary and academic experiments with the “dissolution of the ‘I’ in collective storylines and processes,” Savater-Fernández writes:

12 Amador Fernández-Savater. “Apuntes de acampadasol.” 5/20/2011. <http://blogs.publico.es/ fueradelugar/376/apuntes-de-acampadasol-1>. Accessed 1/2/2013

13 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Translated by Kristin Ross. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 18. Michel De Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven F. Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 6.

14 Rancière, p. 18. De Certeau, p. 6..

I am familiar with and have practiced this type of anonymity. But now I also wonder if this is the only possible way to escape the curse of the “individual and proprietary author,” if it the only interesting and liberating articulation between an “I” and a “we,” the common and the singular. I see that in social networks and blogs there is a use of the first person, with the power of that kind of embodied statement, but as just one more proper name, like anyone else. This proper name is connected to a collective flow of conversation, contributing to a great coral conversations (blogsphere, hashtags, etc.). Perhaps in this moment we can think of the collective as a system of resonances among singular points and not only as a mural drawn by many hands.¹⁵

In Fernández-Savater’s view, new social technologies provide a good model for understanding the relationship between the individual and the collective in the recent movements. These technologies allow one to situate oneself alongside others, to become just one more proper name “like anyone else,” rather than pursuing a kind of ultimate fusion of human energy where nobody can determine who is who. The reference to “hashtags” is telling; the Twitter retweet functions simultaneous as an affirmation of one’s proper name *and* an expression of a common sentiment. While the argument could be made that Fernandez-Savater’s “system of resonances” was simply a digital repackaging of the culture industry denounced by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno,¹⁶ this analysis of mass media as mass deception breaks down when we look at the concrete cases of 15-M and Occupy. Indeed, the “system of resonances” quickly became literalized in Zuccotti park in the form of the “people’s mic,” an ad hoc creation of the initial hours of the occupation in response to the government ban on loudspeakers in public spaces. Participants would stand up and voice their opinions and proposals, pausing after a few words while the crowd or assembly repeated them, carrying the message to an ever-widening circle. While the “people’s mic” was subject to various forms of manipulation, from the temperament of the assembly to the eloquence of the speaker to simple sound interference, perhaps its most innovative characteristic was that it left the *media* almost entirely out of the mediation between the personal and the collective. Moreno-Caballud would later write that it was the very modulation of the will of the assembly that acted as the conduit for the movement’s message: “The interesting thing about the people’s mic is that it works like the movement: it doesn’t simply consist of individuals molded into a strongly identified and identifiable group, but instead articulates a variable collective composition that grows in direct proportion to how much people like what is proposed –louder voices, more agreement– or, conversely, diminishes when a proposal is implausible or objectionable –weaker voices, less agreement.”¹⁷

15 Fernández-Savater. www.publico.es. Accessed 12/14/2012.

16 See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Sanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002.

17 Personal correspondence.

I would add: this “testing” mechanism of the people’s mic is precisely what mediates between the individual and the collective will, a thought voiced by an individual that is then incorporated (or not incorporated) into the discourse of the assembly.

The emphasis on plain language, the idea that the movement’s formulations would have to be broad enough so that “everyone fits,” and the politics of what Fernández-Savater would elsewhere call “anonymity in the first person” were the operating principles of the Spanish contingent of Occupy Wall Street. All of these principles were congruent with the belief that the movement’s message would be determined not only by what it said but also by who said it. The dramatic urgency with which the burgeoning Outreach committee addressed the issue of actually making the 99% slogan into a 99% testifies to the Spanish commitment to looking beyond the encampment to the broader geographies of the neighborhood, the city, and the country as a whole. In his email of September 19th, when this message still had not gone mainstream, Moreno-Caballud warned against the risk of excluding the 99% by continuing to draw mainly on academic and activist rhetoric. I continue to find this email the most moving expression of the core ideas of Occupy—an encapsulating statement on the dangers as well as the dynamism of the movement and a recognition of the necessary temporality of the movement: “We have a lot of attention in the internet and ever mainstream media, let’s use it now before it’s gone! Let’s create a really inclusive and massive movement...”¹⁸

What would have happened had Moreno-Caballud *not* sent the email? Maybe nothing would have changed. In the fervid moments of social agitation, as we have seen over and over the past few years, the most improbable events and stories can have the most profound global effects. Contingency, however, is not chance. Moreno-Caballud’s recuperation of the 99% slogan in this moment testifies to his belief that shedding the schismatic identity of the occupier as activist and academic could not simply be announced, but rather had to be repeatedly voiced and practiced in the atmosphere of the movement itself. The success of this email had as much to do with sheer tenacity of repeating the 99% slogan over the activist rhetoric that had initially installed itself in the encampment as it did with the “event” of the formulation of the slogan. Whatever can be said about the legacy of Occupy, the call for a “massive” movement was indeed taken up that week in September. Whether or not the transformation of the “traditional identities” of the activist and the academic will occur has yet to be seen.

4. Problems and Progress

Although the Occupy community initiatives of late 2011 such as Occupy Sandy and Strike Debt reenergized the movement and forced the mainstream

18 Moreno-Caballud. Email to september17@googlegroups.com. “#OccupyWallStreet stays alive by becoming #WeAreThe99%.” 9/9/2011.

media and academics alike to revise the emerging narratives of Occupy as a failed effort, there is little doubt that the aspirations of full inclusivity that motivated the 99% message met with serious obstacles. Already in the first month of the occupation in Zuccotti Park, many participants and commentators remarked on the low percentage of people of color in the movement, particularly African Americans. In a November, 2011 op-ed in the *Washington Post*, “Why African Americans aren’t embracing Occupy Wall Street,” Stacy Patton noted that while blacks make up 12.6 percent of the U.S. population, surveys showed that they composed only 1.6 percent of the Occupy movement. After suggesting that many African Americans were dismissive of Occupy Wall Street as a “white movement” that started when white protestors finally began to suffer some of the economic difficulties that blacks had experienced for years, Patton concludes that “if the Occupy movement does not grow in solidarity with other constituencies of exploited and oppressed people, and if black America does not devise new leadership strategies to deal with today’s problems, the truth of Frederick Douglass’s wisdom will hold—the powerful undertow of race and class in America will keep both blacks and whites from being free.”¹⁹

Patton’s remarks about the distance between the Occupy movement and the African American community strike me now as largely true; my own observations of the early days of the movement largely coincide with this picture. I remember that there were several proposals in Tompkins Square Park in August to move the NYCGA assemblies in New York City to boroughs outside of Manhattan, based on what I still believe to be the correct assumption that participants would vary widely depending on the location of the assemblies. The general inertia in the NYCGA regarding these issues confirmed some of the charges that would later be leveled against the movement. The idea that “African Americans will join the movement once they see what we’re doing” always seemed reductive to me, and events in the early days of the movement suggested that this belief simply wasn’t borne out. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that the Spanish presence in Occupy Wall Street may have exacerbated the problem, since the discourse of the 99%—the “everybody” and “anyone”—sounded a little too like the language of universal rights that have often been betrayed in practice if not in principle. Significantly, the now-widespread assembly principle of “step up, step back,” in which white male assembly participants were asked to take a step back so that other voices could be heard, was not implemented until long after the NYCGA meetings in Tompkins Square Park.

Yet appearances can be deceiving. Anyone who spent time in the student assemblies will recognize how crucial African Americans have been crucial to the growth of the education and debt groups within the movement, and as Graeber notes, the leaders of the historical black Transit Workers Union of New York were “some of the earliest and most enthusiastic endorsers of the

19 Stacy Patton. “Why African Americans aren’t embracing Occupy Wall Street.” 11/25/2011. *Washington Post* online. http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-11-25/opinions/35282541_1_black-churches-black-press-black-households. Accessed 1/2/2013.

occupation, with avid support from rank and file.”²⁰ It should also be remembered that the hip hop artist Lupe Fiasco was one of the few celebrities to offer ideological and tactical support to Occupy Wall Street before September 17th. Finally, a significant moment in the infancy of the Zuccotti encampment was the convergence of Occupy demonstrators and the September 20th protest march in Union Square after the execution of Troy Davis, an African American man whose innocence in the 1989 shooting death of a Georgia police officer was maintained by activists, human right groups and much of the black community. Many within the Occupy movement recall the incredible energy that was unleashed when, after receiving flyers from Occupy participants, a large group of the Troy Davis protestors decided to continue their march toward Zuccotti Park. Several days later, Occupy participants reciprocated by joining a Troy Davis rally. Since this exchange largely took place on the streets, away from where reporters were camped out, it was almost entirely missed by the mainstream media.

One point that Patton makes in her article that could be disputed is that the movement’s relationship to African Americans ran parallel to the traditional racial fault lines in U.S. society. The argument that Occupy originated in and represented “white America” was, as I have suggested, largely a retroactive invention, one that emerged both from certain elements within the movement and from the mainstream media. A perfect example of the insidiousness of the intertwined Occupy and mainstream accounts is the book *Occupying Wall Street: The Inside Story of an Action that Changed America*. Though the book is “anonymous,” claiming to be authored by the “Writers of the 99%,” the back cover sports a blurb from the gatekeeper of hip white American culture, Jonathan Lethem, who describes the book as “An essential and galvanizing on-the-ground account of how oxygen suddenly and miraculously flooded back into the American brain.”²¹ Not only do the chapters on Occupy’s origins, “Beginnings” and “An Occupation is Born,” follow the general trend in suggesting that the global movements of early 2011 served as a “template” for the NYCGA, Bloombergville, and Occupy; they also fetishize the role of the white American cultural connectors who were able to transform the foreign protests into a message that could go directly into the American brain. According to the book’s narrative, the protagonist of the movement’s prehistory is the previously-mentioned Willie Osterweil, the American protestor who spent several months in the *acampadas* of Spain. The book’s authors quote Osterweil as saying: “In Spain, I gained renewed urgency and actually (rather than intellectually) recognized the nature of the historical moment and the possibilities available to us in the U.S.”²²

While I have already alluded to Osterweil’s role in the formulation of the 99% slogan, the book gives absolutely no sense of the Spanish or Latino participants who were *actually* (and not just intellectually) in the NYCGA alongside Osterweil. The oxygen transfusion from white America to white America comes

20 Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, p. 73.

21 Jonathan Lethem. *Occupying Wall Street: The Inside Story of an Action that Changed America*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2011. Back cover.

22 Writers of the 99%. *Occupying Wall Street*, p. 7.

full circle in the first paragraph of “An Occupation Is Born,” where the authors speak of the “birth” of the occupation in the efforts of a “small group of mostly young, mostly white men and women [who] made last-minute plans for Saturday, September 17.”²³ In *Occupying Wall Street*, in other words, the movement is whitewashing itself.

Rather than seeing these versions of Occupy’s origins as indicative of the entire movement’s view of its history, I prefer to view this narrative as one that a particular strain of the Occupy movement likes to tell itself. Indeed, the explosion of popularity of Occupy in late September and October of 2011 coincided with an increased interest in the movement on the part of writers like Lethem and the rest of the “cool” division of the white American cultural establishment embodied in such organs as the New York-based magazine *N + 1* and the San Francisco-based magazine *McSweeney’s*. These literary and cultural magazines tended to reproduce the sentiments of the “second wave” of mostly white American occupiers, whose engagement with the movement commenced when Zuccotti Park was in the midst of becoming a media zoo, and when it was hard for everyone—myself included—to separate the style from the substance of the encampment. This is not to say that these participants have been uncommitted to the movement’s aims; only that they represent one of a number of demographics within the movement and one of the many possible narratives of the movement’s trajectory. The media outlets that covered the first weeks of Occupy Wall Street largely suffered from a confirmation bias: they ventured to Zuccotti Park expecting to film and write about a group of overprivileged and underinformed white hipsters, and they sought out just those occupiers who fit the stereotype.

If we take a look again at the NYCGA participants who weighed in on the Single Demand email thread, it is clear that the “original” occupiers represented anything but typical white America. Isham Christie is a Choctaw from North Dakota, Amin Hussain is a Palestian-American, Lorenzo Serna is Latino and Amerindian, Moreno-Caballud is Spanish—only Graeber and Osterweil come close to fitting the *Occupying Wall Street* profile. Additionally, the mainstream American narrative has almost entirely overlooked the strong connections between Occupy and the Latino community that arose in large part because the early Spanish, Latino, and Latin American members of the movement believed that outreach in local Spanish-speaking communities would be crucial to the movement’s survival. Early in the movement, the Puerto Rican Pablo Benson, with the help of Santa Cecilia, started an Occupy en español working group where participants from across the Spanish-speaking world held assemblies, conducted interviews with media in Latin America and Spain, and began to discuss ways to create networks with Latino community organizations in the United States.

One of the great success stories of the Occupy movement in New York has been its ability to connect with longstanding Latino and immigrant

²³ Writers of the 99%, p. 15.

organizations, including the community groups La Indignación and La Unión in Brooklyn. Over the past year, the 16 Beaver Street group has held open meetings with members of the community-run Cochibamba water plant in Bolivia and the Buenos Aires-based Colectivo Situaciones. The great subterranean current of Occupy continues to be its Spanish speakers, who have expanded from the few Spaniards, Latinos, and Latin Americans initially affiliated with the movement to include everything from undocumented workers to grassroots organizations to participants in occupations outside the United States. More recently, the Spanish-speaking contingent of Occupy has devoted much of their time and effort to the pro-commons forum Making Worlds, which has brought writers and theorists such as Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis and James Quilligan together with community members, artists, teachers, and academics. This turn to the “commons,” user-regulated exchange systems (e.g. Wikipedia) seen as an alternative to both the state and the market, reflects a conscious attempt to build upon the ideas and practices of mutual support in Zuccotti Park—the free Occupy kitchen, medical aid, etc.—rather than Occupy’s protest rhetoric.

What the preceding paragraphs show is that many of the “public relations” issues that Occupy faced had as much to do with the narratives told in and about the movement as the practices and beliefs of the movement itself. These narratives influence not only public perceptions about Occupy, but also, in a far more covert way, the theories about Occupy that circulate among academics and activists. What, then, is the role of the academic in relation to Occupy Wall Street? I am reminded of a phrase that Moreno-Caballud repeated to me multiple times in the early days of the encampment: “Más que nuevas teorías, necesitamos nuevas narrativas;” “More than new theories, we need new narratives.” The story I have told about the Spanish contingent of Occupy is—or at least attempts to be—one such narrative, but there are hundreds more that could be told. Not only “origin” stories, but also stories that show how the multiple movements, actions, and theories of the past have had an impact on the social movements of the present. We may not all speak in the same language—there are real differences in methodology and discipline that shape our modes of writing about these movements—but those of us who consider ourselves students and practitioners of culture and literature have a special burden to make these narratives understandable to those outside of academic and activist circles.²⁴ Given our background and our training, we are in a position to give serious (and critical) accounts of the social movements that are currently transforming our world. Of course, academics can’t see everything that is happening on the ground, but we can recognize the limits of what we see, and try to see as much as we can. This may not make us heroes of the revolution. But at the very least we can participate in the telling of new stories about our global and local societies and the complexities of the changes they are undergoing.

24 My own thinking about the relationship between the 15-M and Occupy has been influenced a great deal by the Spanish sociologist Eduardo Romanos, who interviewed me in late 2012 for a soon-to-be-published article on the Spanish participants in the NYCGA.

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