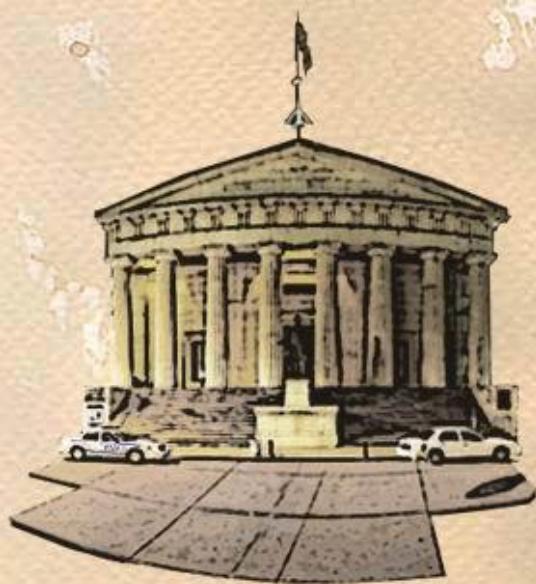


stories to imagine an alternative



**the movement of
occupy wallstreet**

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Stories to imagine an alternative

The movement of Occupy Wall Street

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Introduction

In April 2012, the so-called sleepful protests started in New York City. Sleeping on the sidewalk for the purpose of political protests is legal, following a court order from 2001. Members of the Occupy Wall Street movement decided to sleep on Wall Street, right in front of the stock exchange. For a couple of weeks a group of people ranging from twenty to a hundred slept on the sidewalks. Despite the court order, the police bothered the protesters all through the night and morning, depriving them of sleep and making the occasional arrest for having a cardboard sign taking up more than 50% of the sidewalk. Then they decided the protesters camped across the street from the Stock Exchange, on the steps of Federal Hall.

Next to the statue of George Washington there is now a small barricaded area that Occupiers have come to call the 'Freedom Cage'. Inside this Freedom Cage, protesters are allowed their basic rights to freedom of free speech and protest. Inside these barricades they are allowed to sleep and speak out their grievances. Only twenty-five people are permitted to occupy the Freedom Cage at any one time and a couple of policemen keep watch at all times. Every once in a while the officers come up to the cage, count the number of people inside and make the surplus of protesters leave the cage. This means that there is often a line in front of the Freedom Cage. It is an ironic situation, Occupiers wanting to enter a cage in order to feel free.

Seven months earlier in September 2011, when thousands of people flooded the streets of New York City and occupied Zucotti Park near America's financial High Temple Wall Street, a moment turned into a movement. The Occupy movement took on global proportions in October and Occupy Wall Street (hereafter, OWS) managed to physically occupy Zucotti Park, which they dubbed Liberty Plaza. They developed and sustained a community presence there for almost two months until they were violently evicted by police force on November 15th.

During the winter they went underground. They struggled with internal problems, brought upon by the loss of their space and that additional momentum. They were forced to rethink the way they organized themselves and proceeded to act primarily through autonomous groups. As a result the movement became much more fragmented and the need for community building became crucial. But still they remained active and passionate and continued to pressurize on corporate and governmental authorities in various ways. Those same authorities continued to put pressure back on OWS as well. The Sleepful Protests are an interesting illustration of this ongoing struggle and of the contradictory and often ironic situations that sometimes result from it. But the odd, unpredictable

situations that form in and around OWS are also a source of imaginative power and a breeding ground for new possibilities.

During the last two decades there has been a rise in anti-globalist and anti-corporate movements that address the negative consequences of what the protesters view as neoliberal and corporate globalization (Juris 2008, Graeber 2005). Over the past couple of years, the dialogue in academic spheres has shifted too, as literature on neoliberalism expands. The negative effects that most forms of neoliberal government can have and have had on people and the environment have been extensively analyzed. The conclusion that neoliberalism should be questioned critically has been reached many times (Ferguson 2009, Bauman 2010). But Occupy Wall Street, inspired by the Arab Spring and the occupations in Argentina and Spain, is the first movement that definitively changed dialogues about neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 2008) and corporate power in America in the mainstream media and politics.

This thesis is a collection of stories. With these stories, I seek to describe aspects of what Occupy Wall Street was like at a specific moment in time, based on the three months I spent in New York City. It was after they had the occupation in the park, a time of which people speak with nostalgia. It was before the momentum that the spring awakening brought was harvested. But that particular moment carried with it all past occurrences and stories of those who were involved in creating the path OWS went along. Stories are a central aspect to cultural anthropology, because what are anthropologists if not interpreters of the stories that people tell (Geertz)? But the idea of stories goes beyond the ones people tell and mine reflects a presupposition of something that George Bateson (1979) has called '*the pattern of patterns which connects all living creatures*'(1979: 14). One way to imagine that pattern is through stories. The stories in this thesis have a specific purpose. The ones I chose to tell illustrate how OWS is a space for alternative imagination and possibilities. They will demonstrate how the movement depends on imaginative power and that they use that power to create new possibilities. At the same time these stories will show struggle. Trying to imagine 'outside the box' is a challenge, because in various - and sometimes disturbing - ways the Occupiers struggle with the boundaries of their own imagination. Often others ensure they cannot cross those boundaries, but sometimes they themselves are not able.

During a period of 88 days from February until May 2012 I conducted fieldwork in the OWS movement in New York City using participant observation as my main research method. I became a facilitator in the Think Tank working group and together with the other facilitators I tried to be part of as many discussions possible, for a short period almost daily on Union Square. I offered my mind and my body to as many conversations, discussions, trainings, marches and assemblies I could be part

of in that limited amount of time. I came to understand the movement, the Occupiers and their logic in ways that can only be grasped as an active participant. Juris (2007) claims that being a researcher and an activist at the same time enables you to obtain better data and arrive at better interpretations and analyses (2007: 166-167).

In this thesis I contribute to both academic spheres and to the movement of OWS. I start with outlining the demands discussion. This is an important discussion, first of all because it engages with the main misconception about OWS, namely the idea that they do not have any demands. Secondly, it illustrates a clash of perspectives on what is considered to be politically effective. To conclude, it shows in what sense OWS is dependant on imagination in this particular case. The second chapter tells a story about a dog, a field and different colors of ink. It picks up on imagination and draws up a philosophical explanation of how imagination works. In chapter three I discuss a topic I would rather not discuss. Unfortunately, police violence is in many ways an obvious boundary of OWS's imagination and it is therefore necessary to discuss the matter. Chapter four is on horizontalism and process, crucial to OWS's alternative imagination. It describes the basics and a small reflection on some of the struggles process exposes. In chapter five I explain my presuppositions. I account for my approach to the field and the methods I have used, justifying the bias that shows through all my stories. Chapter six is a conclusion and will hopefully shed a different light on everything the reader has read until then.

I hope I do justice to the vision, ideas and struggles of the passionate, inspiring and endlessly creative Occupiers I met.

1. On demands

'Look, it was cool when they were down there, but after a while it just seemed like they were having a little too much fun. It basically looked like they were having a party all the time. I mean, what the Hell were they actually doing there, while 'occupying'? Because really, what's the point? I don't think they even know themselves, they can't even form some concrete demands.' My colleague Dana does not really look at me while saying this and I try to hold my tongue. I realize I am up to my ears in OWS and cannot possibly expect the same sensitivity for the movement from people who have not been involved at all and just see what happened on the News. At least Dana is civil about it, unlike some people. It is quite common to have some random stranger yelling at you to either get a job or have a bath, when you're participating in identifiable OWS space, such as on Union Square at the time or during marches.

The extreme misrepresentation of the movement by the media does not help either. It does not enable the general public to form a well-grounded opinion on what the movement stands for. OWS still is confusing to a lot of people. Initially, the movement was very successful in getting its message across, tapping into a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction after the financial crisis and making tactical use of social media and the Internet (Juris 2012). But once that flush of novelty and excitement had died down, those who had not been at Liberty Plaza for long enough (if at all) felt confused about the point of the movement. As I have stated before, mainstream media fed - and still feeds - these feelings by structurally misrepresenting the movement; focusing on clashes of the protesters with the Police, reporting one-sided, incomplete stories and portraying the Occupiers as homeless, unemployed hippies who are '*too lazy to try and fit in like the rest of us*', to quote a passer-by that I tried to give the latest issue of *the Occupied Wall Street Journal*. But the most recurrent issue is the critique on the apparent lack of a concrete list of demands.

1.1 'The skeptical position'

Since the absence of a list of demands seems a legitimate critique, the demands discussion is frequent within OWS circles too. Let me illustrate this with an example of one of the Think Tanks that took place on Union Square. The Think Tank is a working group that hosts 'horizontal' discussions on whatever subject people would like to talk about. On this day, the sun was shining and we sat on the steps of Union Square, right next to the small information table that OWS had set up there after the six-month anniversary on March 17. Behind us the Hare Krishna group that played music every day on the square had just started and had gathered a small crowd around them. My

friend Stan, who had left everything in Alabama to come to OWS, held up a cardboard sign that said 'Think Tank'. Nina, my fellow facilitator with her olive skin and bright green eyes, just did a mic check - OWS's solution to not being allowed to use electrical amplified microphones - to announce the start of our conversation. Our conversation was about community building, because Nina and I were talking to a girl from Occupy Chicago about the General Assembly structures, a hot topic in OWS at the time. We wanted to continue the conversation in the Think Tank and had an interesting mix of long time members from various occupations in the country, recently recruited Occupiers and curious passerby's. We spoke for a while and had various people 'on stack', which is the list that the facilitator makes to keep track on those who want to speak. We all agreed that we needed a strong community in order to make change happen. Then a girl, that I knew had just joined, or 'plugged in' the week before, posed the following question:

D: But do we have a common goal? I feel like we need a common goal, why are we not making any concrete demands?

S: I actually just had this conversation in the train. Our conclusion was that we couldn't make demands from governments, because they are the oppressors. We don't want to use their form of structuring.

Y: The thing is that by not making demands it enables us to think differently about things.

T: But we are making demands, just not in pen and writing. Every day we're making demands. But if we force demands on the group it ties the individual's hands. Right now we're some kind of nebula towards social causes. We're working towards solidarity, without individual voices.

M: The government is great at solving demands and keeping the problem. We need to perform instead of demand. Look at for example school kitchens. People made that happen. We need to make things happen. Bottom up.

G: We're not scared of demands, we demand things from ourselves every day.

T: When a group has a common cause, a simple message is good. Having one demand endangers the movement though, because what happens if the demand is fulfilled? On the other hand, if we don't have demands, why do we do actions? Aren't demands important for the morality of people? How do we build on that?

S: I guess our only demand should be fairness.

C: We need demands that are in the direction of people's needs and that is the hardest challenge.

N: The thing is that demands don't work. We need to think about accountability. Demands create separation. We have talked so much about demands, let's talk about solutions.

Part of a Think Tank transcript, 21-04-2012

Most speakers in this conversation were longtime Occupiers. Their comments show how making demands does not make much sense to them. Judith Butler (2012) published an analysis of the demands discussion in Occupy's theoretical magazine Tidal. The article is called '*So, what are the*

demands?’ and in it she analyses - as she likes to call it - ‘the skeptical position’ that this question implies: Occupy should have a concrete list of demands and these demands should be demands that can be satisfied. If a social movement wants to be considered political and be taken seriously, says Butler (2012), the idea that it should meet those two requirements is deeply incorporated in mainstream politics. In the case of America, ‘mainstream politics’ means a federal constitutional republic with a bipartisan majority democracy. The skeptical position demonstrates that this particular form of politics is *assumed* and that this is different from the form of politics Occupy pursues: a horizontal, participatory and direct democracy based on a form of consensus process. If we look at the Think Tank discussion described above, we see that both these requirements are mentioned.

1.2 *All our grievances are connected*

Tu (T) is one of the most compassionate Occupiers I came to know. He is always wearing this red and black chequered jacket and has a radiant smile. He is working on a huge endeavor, which involves days of juice fasting by large numbers of people to create awareness for world famine. He refers to the first requirement that Occupy has to meet in order to be taken serious by mainstream politics: provide a concrete list of demands. He says that just because OWS is not making demands in writing, it does not mean the movement is not making any demands at all. He then explains why that particular sort of politics does not resonate with him, because he regards making specific demands and writing those down as exclusive behavior and oppressive to the individual. He likes it that OWS is like a ‘*nebula towards social causes*’ and feels that it stimulates solidarity. It made me think about this huge, beautiful puppet of Lady Liberty, who is a familiar sight during the many marches OWS participates in. Her crown says:

‘All of our grievances are connected’

Her puppets claim that whatever grievance or demand OWS expresses, in the end they are all connected. Making a list will not show how all these demands are ultimately all connected to each other. Of course we can formulate concrete demands for Occupy, like forgiving student debt or stop foreclosing houses. But Butler (2012) asks:

Through what language and action does one call attention to a growing inequality of wealth in which the rich monopolize increasingly greater amounts of wealth and the poor now includes increasing numbers of the population?

Butler 2012

THE DECLARATION OF OCCUPATION of NYC

AS AGREED UPON
BY THE GENERAL
ASSEMBLY OF NYC
ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2011
IN NEW YORK CITY

DO YOU SEE YOUR GRIEVANCES HERE OR DO YOU SEE THEM MISSING? THERE ARE SOME WAYS TO GET INVOLVED. FIND ONE THAT WORKS FOR YOU
GO TO ZAGGTTI PARK OR YOUR LOCAL OCCUPATION SITE. MEET OTHERS WHO ARE DOING THE SAME THING. TALK WITH THEM. LEARN FROM THEM. DO WHAT THEY ARE DOING THERE - HAVE A SIGN AND HOLD IT UP. BRING FOOD TO SHARE. CONTRIBUTE AND SERVE. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND OTHERS. TO SUPPORT AND STRENGTHEN YOUR LOCAL OCCUPATION SITE. SIMPLY TALK WITH OTHERS WHO ARE DOING THE SAME THING. DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS. DON'T BE AFRAID TO SPEAK UP. DON'T BE AFRAID TO SELL YOUR SERVICES. DON'T BE AFRAID TO SWAP YOUR SERVICES FOR THE SERVICES OF OTHERS. DON'T BE AFRAID TO SWAP YOUR SERVICES FOR THE SERVICES OF YOUR FRIENDS. DON'T BE AFRAID TO SWAP YOUR SERVICES FOR THE SERVICES OF YOUR COMMUNITY. IN ANY WAY YOU BELIEVE FORGE A MORE JUST WORLD!

LET'S ACKNOWLEDGE THE REALITY: THE FUTURE OF THE HUMAN RACE REQUIRES THE COOPERATION OF ITS MEMBERS. OUR INCREASINGLY INTERCONNECTED WORLD OBSCURES THE UNDERLYING TRUTH THAT ALL OF OUR GRIEVANCES ARE CONNECTED



THESE GRIEVANCES ARE NOT ALL INCLUSIVE. HOWEVER YOU HAVE BEEN WRONGED BY THE CORPORATE FORCES OF THE WORLD. OCCUPY WALL STREET STRIVES TO BE YOUR ALLY. THEY, THE CORPORATIONS, PLACE PROFIT OVER PEOPLE, SELF INTEREST OVER JUSTICE AND OPPRESSION OVER EQUALITY. THEY RUN OUR GOVERNMENTS. LET US NOT BE WEIGHED DOWN BY THE COMPLEXITY OF OUR SITUATION, BUT UNITED BY ITS SINGULARITY AS WE RE-ESTABLISH A SYSTEM THAT PROTECTS OUR RIGHTS.

Figure 2.1: All our grievances are connected ¹

Formulating demands around such sentiments will never provide you with an overarching structure that explains how exactly all these demands are all connected to each other. Nor will it account for the observation that - in Butler's (2012) words - the way capitalism works now increases inequality and '*remains unchecked by existing states and global authorities who have a vested interest in making capitalism work*' (Butler 2012). Butler (2012) calls for a broad understanding how exactly grievances, from which demands may follow, are connected, in order that we won't reproduce

¹ Source: www.nycga.net

inequality again. We should understand how demands turn into demands. On their website, the New York General Assembly (which is the same as OWS) published a piece of artwork based on the Declaration of Occupation (Figure 2.1) that represents in a creative way the complexity of the problem that OWS addresses.

1.3 Demanding the impossible

The second assumption in Butler's (2012) description of the skeptical position is that demands should be demands that can be satisfied. Marina Sitrin (2011) writes that when the organizing for the occupation started in July, the goal was to create a space as democratic as possible. Once that space was provided, people could start thinking whether they wanted to make demands and, more importantly, who they could make demands from. Who will OWS make demands from? When you make demands, who will satisfy them? Making demands from a government implies that you believe that the very system you are criticizing can solve your demands. Also, do you believe that the system can solve your demands in a way that will not then reproduce the same inequalities that brought you to action in the first place (Butler 2012, Maeckelbergh 2012)? Stan (S) for example, said that he does not want to demand things from the government. To him, they are the oppressor and they are obviously doing things wrong. He thinks we should not turn to them to solve things.

Maria (M) then adds that the fundamental problem would not be solved even if all demands were met. She says we have to make things happen ourselves, that is, through direct action. Why is it that the government cannot fulfill demands to satisfaction? It is because the American government is no longer neutral, although the assumption that the state is neutral is still made. Instead, American government is highly influenced by corporate finances (for example: for years the position of the minister of finances has been taken up by someone from Goldman Sachs).

Formulating soluble demands will only attribute legitimacy to those who can solve demands. But by taking direct action, the illegitimacy of those powers is revealed (Butler 2012). When people question the legitimacy of the authorities in place, as OWS is doing, those same authorities will ask – or force – them to affirm that legitimacy. So in OWS's case, mainstream politics and mainstream media ask the movement for the formation of demands that are possible to solve. But – after all these considerations – the only demands OWS could actually make are impossible, broad and vague, just like Stan's demand for fairness. And of course, demanding the impossible will be considered unrealistic, irrational and utopian. But if you think about it, are these not exactly the things that require some imagination?

Considering a short history of the word ‘imagination’, we see that a common conception of ‘the imaginary’ holds that it is never the basis of reality. But earlier, according to earlier Medieval and Ancient ideas, ‘*what we call “the imagination” was considered the zone of passage between reality and reason*’(Graeber 2011: 52). This is radically different from the common conception and it is this kind of imagination, which Graeber (2011) calls *the transcendent notion of the imagination* (2011: 53), to which Occupy appeals when they show that they are not afraid to demand the impossible: they believe they can make the ‘unrealistic’, the ‘impossible’ or the imaginary really happen.

Nina (N) swiftly concluded our discussion on demands that day at Union Square, voicing an opinion most Occupiers agreed upon. Given the enormous diversity within the movement, demands will likely only separate. We then had a conversation about solutions: alternative economical systems, how to fulfill the most basic needs like food, shelter and education to enable people to reach their full potential and how to do that within this society. We were forced to imagine these things, because most of us had not seen these kind of ideas put in practice and we had a lot of difficulties imagining them within the framework of the current political and economic system. But it did not seem so unrealistic though, because we felt empowered to really make things happen ourselves.

2. On imagination

When the radical philosopher Slavoj Žižek came down to OWS on October 9 for his famous speech, he told the crowd a joke from communist times. It was about a man from Germany who was sent to work in Siberia. Because he knew that all his letters would be censored he told his friends that when he would write, he would use either blue or red ink. Blue ink meant he was telling the truth. Red ink meant he was telling a lie. After a month he sent a letter written in blue ink. It said: ‘Life is really great here. The stores are full of good food. The movie theatres are showing great Western movies. My apartment is huge and luxurious. I can do everything here, except for buying red ink.’ Žižek (2011) thanked OWS for giving everyone red ink. He said that now we finally have a way to articulate our non-freedom.

OWS has made a lot of people realize that they feel like they are not free, but oppressed and subjected to exploitation for the wellbeing of the richest 1%. Their reasons for having those feelings differ widely, ranging from broad, theoretical ideas on equality, social justice and moral responsibility to being a collateral victim (Bauman 2010) from America’s neoliberal society. When OWS started, maybe some felt as if they were given a choice again, in Žižek’s (2011) words, between red and blue ink. My informants state that taking action with OWS is different than just going on protest marches, in part because of the idea that everyone is a leader. People feel empowered again and inspired to experiment with their own potential.

However, the longer you are involved with OWS, the more you realize that the movement is not just about articulating that non-freedom in red ink. OWS has the *whole* color spectrum in ink to offer. You are challenged, not only to articulate why you are not free, but also to think about and actually shape the society of which you are part and can be free in. Accepting that challenge means entering the vast scope of possibilities that OWS has to offer: the endless possibilities of the imagination. But then one might ask, how endless is the imagination really?

2.1 *The dog in the field*

My friend Winter and I are having a coffee at a place called the Grey Dog, right before the affinity group training starts that is taking place in preparation for May Day. Winter is a smart guy. He looks like the philosophers he loves to read so much. His hair is dark and long and falls around his face in small curls. He is quick to smile and gets sparkling eyes behind his black-framed, heavy glasses. He is great at organizing and he has this playful way of going about his business that makes me smile

when I march near him. We are supposed to do an interview, but get caught up in sharing perspectives and ideas on the part that imagination plays in OWS. I told him earlier that I was collecting stories and Winter apologized that he is not much of a storyteller. He prefers the conceptual, the abstract and the philosophical. So right now, he is excited. He tells me the following story:

It was one of our ‘horizontal pedagogy’ sessions, an experiment that grew out of the Occupy University working group, to try and create educational spaces that can question flows and structures of power and knowledge in the classroom. We were discussing gift giving and had all brought in a gift for someone else. These gifts ranged from free books to rugs to memoirs of old loves. We put them all on the table and began to ask questions about gift giving.

We started to notice that while talking, we kept thinking in terms of exchange. No matter what perspective we took on, there was always an exchange and therefore, no such thing as a pure ‘gift’ or something free. We became very frustrated that we couldn’t talk about movement of goods without getting stuck in an exchange model where there must be a giver and a taker.

Now, one of the pedagogical methods we were experimenting with was coming up with metaphors for how we felt about the class, conversations or encounters that day. The one that came to my head was a dog with an electric collar. The reason for that is that I had the feeling that in our conversation we were constantly trying to pass a certain threshold or horizon, like we knew there was something beyond that point. But every time we came too close, we lost the words. We got shocked.

But in the process we learned that there *is* a fence, or a collar. Even though the world looks like an open field where everything is possible, in fact there is a closed field inscribed in us or for us and it’s nearly impossible to get out of this field. In the case of our conversation, the field was clearly the logic of exchange. Is there a horizon beyond that logic? How can we know, if we can’t even talk about it?

Winter

We end up losing ourselves in thinking up images of a monster called ‘Capitalism’ that roams the fields of our imagination, eating up every fantasy that has no capitalist basis. But that is not what Winter’s story taught me. He showed me how much of a challenge it is to actually imagine an alternative to what we are accustomed to. For some reason, the participants in Winter’s working group session felt like their conversations got stuck whenever they reached a certain point. According to Žižek (2011), our current ruling system is making it impossible for people to dream or imagine beyond a capitalist system. He says that ‘*it’s easy to imagine the end of the world. An asteroid destroying life and so on. But you cannot imagine the end of capitalism*’ (Žižek 2011: 67-68). In a sense, Žižek is addressing the same problem as Winter experienced: wanting to imagine an alternative, but finding yourself unable to and wondering why.

Even though Winter's story is a specific example, on a metaphysical level, portrayed as a dog with an electrical collar, I think that this feeling of 'being stuck' is something a lot of Occupiers experience. I noticed the same sort of problem in many Think Tank conversations too, with the conversation ending when we get to the point where we try to cross that boundary and really imagine an alternative. And it makes me question too: what are those boundaries of that enclosed field inscribed in us and why is it so difficult to get beyond those boundaries? How come that even imagination - a process that to me is the only way to think and talk about the seemingly impossible - has boundaries? What does it even mean to imagine and how is it related to an understanding of society and through that the production of knowledge?

2.2 *The boundaries of imagination*

Throughout philosophical history the way scholars have spoken about imagination can be considered as a dialogue between two different spheres: the individual and the social. In their account for a 'situated imagination', Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002) argue that the imagination is shaped by the complex social reality that we call society and the individual experience of reality including corporeal and sensual experiences. The two spheres are in constant interaction and have the potential to transform one another. Drawing from Castoriadis, Kant, Adorno and Spinoza, Stoetzler and Yuval-David (2002) claim that the imagination creates knowledge from experiences and vice versa. At the same time it is crucial to '*why, whether and what we are ready to experience, perceive and know in the first place*'(Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002: 325). In other words, we cannot imagine what we do not know and at the same time, we do not know what we cannot imagine, *unless* we experience it, by choice, by force or even by accident. According to Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002), even desirable things we consider impossible right now, such as for example a pure gift society, are always modeled on what we think is possible to imagine. Imagination is a process of negotiation, not only between experience and perception, but also between what 'is' and what 'ought to be'. Even though you can try to imagine 'what ought to be', you can never imagine something that is not based on your own experiences and knowledge.

Imagination is situated; our imaginary horizons are affected by the positioning of our gaze.

Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002: 327

To relate this back to Winter's example, in this light it is easy to understand why he feels like a dog trapped in a field. He does not know what is outside the field of the logic of exchange, because he

has never experienced it or learned about it. Therefore he cannot imagine or talk about it, even though he really wants to. But the interesting thing here is that Winter does realize vaguely what it is that he cannot imagine, because he desires an alternative to what he is experiencing right now. So, he does know what he cannot imagine. This realization is important and I think promising for trying to make another world possible. Most Occupiers are with OWS, because what they experience in daily life is not what they perceive the world ought to be like. OWS gives them, among many other things, the experience of an alternative, radical imagination. This alternative imagination involves for example their horizontal approach, the focus on direct action, the mutual aid they provide and the opportunity to build and share skills. As time goes by, people gain more knowledge and become more conscious of that alternative imagination in contrast to the mainstream imagination of a society they were – and most people still are – accustomed to.

To the Occupiers, OWS's alternative imagination sounds wonderful and empowering. In part this is because they have experienced it to be wonderful and empowering. I can imagine how it sounds confusing and alienating to others though. Why would you sit down on the dirty floor for hours, to talk to people you might think need a bath about the (seeming) impossibility of an equal and just world? Why would leave your job, house and family, like Stan did, to camp out on the hard concrete floor of Liberty Plaza in the rain? Why would you submit to police violence, jail time and exhaustion just to march all day long and not even have the mainstream media cover your actions impartially?

OWS offers another possibility to feel free, after experiencing or learning about injustice. Those who do not want to stand around doing nothing about it are now empowered to stand up, take action and consider what they can do about the world with others who have similar views. They get to learn about, and to experience a different kind of freedom than the freedom of consuming, or the freedom of voting in a bipartisan system. And even though of course OWS has its struggles and the Occupiers have their own flaws, that different vision of freedom empowers people to take matters into their own hands and actively make the world more like the one they would like to live in.

3. On the ambiguity of Police violence

I am searching for American justice. This country, so called America, likes to export democracy to other nations. Like Iraq. Like Iran. Like Libya. We want to liberate! Over there and over there, but right here, I'm searching for American justice. I'm confused. What kind of example are we, America, setting for over there? Our taxpayer dollars are cracking our skulls and cracking our ribs. They are trying to crack our hopes. But let's continue to search for American justice.

Anonymous protester, during the support debrief after the violence on M17

Maybe I should not address the issue of violent police responses to OWS. They are a distraction, you see. A distraction for the public, from seeing what OWS is really about. A distraction for the Occupiers too, from being able to focus on their goals: demanding and creating a more just and equal economic system and society for everyone. But even though I would prefer not to be distracted as well, confrontations with the police remain, sadly, an important part of what it means to be an Occupier.

Before I elaborate, let me tell you about M17 (March 17th).

Today is the six-month anniversary of OWS: M17 and the evening started out like a dream. A huge General Assembly (GA) is taking place having to use three waves from 'the people's mic', the solution to not being allowed to use electronic amplification. The words of the speaker are repeated and thus amplified three times by the crowd in order for all participants of the assembly to hear. After the gloomy wintertime and the shouting matches during Spokes Council and GA's, the experience of unity, excitement, festivity and hope are feelings I have not felt since my entry into the field some six weeks earlier. We are outside, in large numbers and we are feeling empowered. The facilitators announce that this is going to be a 24-hour occupation.

After and during the GA, for those who did not join the assembly, OWS celebrates. People are dancing, catching up with old friends, making music, chanting and are holding 'soapboxes': random 'mic checks' where people say whatever they would like to share. Courtney, an artist who is also part of the Think Tank, and I are having a smoke, eating an apple and observing the scene, covered in blankets that someone has handed out. After a while I decide to go home; it has been a long day. Just after I said my goodbyes, a band from the St. Patricks Day parade approaches Zucotti Park and Occupiers come flocking to cheer and dance. I go to check it out, thinking that I'll leave after.

Then, out of nowhere, the hundreds of police that had been gathering around the park all through the evening burst into action and break up the band with force. They push people away heavy-handed and one of the police men smashes an instrument on the streets. People are angry, it is

very unclear why the police are breaking up the band with such strong-arm-tactics. Within minutes things get out of hand. Some Occupiers are screaming for everyone to get back in the park. I see my friend Tim on the other side of the street. He has been joking that he has to protect the foreigners around (meaning me and his British girlfriend) from getting arrested, so that we won't be deported. He is trying to move my way, but a crowd of police blocks his way.

'Shame! Shame! Shame!' the protesters shout. They sit down in the park, determined not to give way. I realize that an enormous number of police has surrounded the square and I back away from the scene. I am expecting arrests, but not the violence that follows when the police move in from the back of the park. There is complete chaos, as the police are surrounding the Occupiers in the park and are using excessive violence to force them to go away. Some people are trying to get out of the park, but many refuse to leave. A group of us are standing across the street, watching the scene with horror.

I see police beating those who sit down with their truncheons, on their hands, their shoulders, their necks and their heads. I see people literally being dragged away and when arrested, handcuffed much too tightly. There is blood on the faces that emerge from the park and their eyes are filled with fear, anger and confusion. The night is a blur of bodies and screaming.

The next couple of days the violence is all that people are talking about. The Internet is flooding with videos of the events, of a woman who is having a seizure on the streets, due to by police inflicted head wounds. A group of cops is standing around her, refusing to let anyone near her to give medical attention. The ambulance arrives after a full seventeen minutes. Another video shows how a police officer bangs a protester's head through a window. So much for debates on property destruction. The mainstream newspapers barely mention the incident, except for stating that Occupy protesters were removed from Zucotti Park with force.

So you see. I would really rather not discuss the police violence, but the circumstances hardly leave me a choice. The story of M17 is exceptionally violent, but hanging around OWS does mean being exposed to a constant police presence and a risk of being subjected to violent behavior. Arrests take place arbitrarily, sometimes for doing no more than watching a march pass by. It would not be right to pretend these things do not have any effect on what happens in the movement. That would be wishful thinking.

The excessive use of police force and its unnecessary violent repercussions towards peaceful protesters is a means of oppression. It has even attracted the attention of human rights watch organizations like the Organization for Security and Operation in Europe. The violent behavior of police is a way of scaring and silencing protesters and it keeps the Occupiers from practicing their

basic rights to protest and freedom of speech. In the eyes of the police, OWS should be stopped, because they are interfering with ‘business as usual’.

As I stated before, their behavior is an effective strategy to distract. It distracts the mainstream public, because reports about arrests and violent evictions are usually the only reports about OWS that make it into the news. The Occupiers get distracted too. They are forced to engage in endless discussions on tactics, devising alternative strategies to deal with the violence, how to offer support to traumatized victims and how to make all those specific incidents of injustice visible to the public without portraying the movement as a movement of martyrs.

Of course, in some ways these confrontations with the police benefit the movement. The physical symbol of state oppression in the form of the countless police bothering Occupiers, creates a clear common enemy and shared suffering brings people closer together. Jail support is a wonderful and practical example of how solidarity can be improved and instead of being discouraged, most of my informants feel strengthened in their beliefs that they are doing the right thing.

Graeber (2005, 2011) explains how activists and police forces make use of two different political ontologies, or set of assumptions. He uses this dichotomy to account for the existence of Left and Right political positions and at the same time it explains the constant clash between the police and activists. Where the police, a symbol of the state, operates on a political ontology of violence, activists like the Occupiers operate on a political ontology of imagination. The former claims that being realistic means taking into account destructive forces whereas the latter tends to focus on creative forces (2005: 509-512, 2011).

To return to the events on M17, the very energetic GA that took place in the first part of the evening is an example of the ontology of imagination. Occupiers were trying to have a transforming conversation in a public space, using a process that is supposed to empower everyone’s voice. The necessity of imagining other people’s perspectives is crucial, because decisions are made based on consensus process. In the end, everyone has to agree with the decision made. But that is not the only kind of imagining that took place during that GA. In break out groups we spoke about what we wanted to see on May Day, a big day of action on May 1st. The most creative ideas came out of those conversations, ranging from building puppets and handing out flowers to chaining open the subway entrances in order to let everyone travel for free that day.

The reaction of the police to those plans and to the festive events taking place that night is a clear practice of the ontology of violence. Graeber (2005) notes that the state has a monopoly on violence. I spoke to an Occupier kicking back a police officer who was beating her with a truncheon. She faces two years in jail. Police officers, acting as agents of the state law, are granted the use of

violence, they are '*the point where the state's monopoly of coercive force takes flesh*' (Graeber 2005: 519). As they are enforcers of government regulations, they can use violence to make people do what they want them to do. At M17, they wanted OWS to leave Zucotti Park, so they forced them.

'I guess it explains why all activists seem to smoke, doesn't it? It's a pretty stressful situation to be exposed to all the time.' Courtney said on the evening of M17, while we were having a cigarette and watching the police close in on us.

4. On horizontalism and process

For some reason, the media and academy are trying with all their might to pinpoint the movement with a particular label. Whereas in September scholars and journalists were happy to describe the movement as a ‘general’ protest against corporate greed and economic inequality, after a few months, especially those who were not involved suddenly felt a need for clarity about OWS. What are they? What kind of movement is this, besides a radical one? What is their political intention? Many voices claimed the movement was anarchist, considering their rejection of formal hierarchy and therefore their lack of formal leadership. This seems like a sound conclusion, since the initial organizing for the occupations in September was done by a group that consisted largely of anarchists. The process and principles they adopted for OWS to use are inherently anarchist as well. Like their refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of existing political institutions, as I explained in the demands discussion. Or OWS’ refusals to acknowledge the legitimacy of existing legal order at all, which the chapter on police violence shows (Graeber 2012). Refusing to leave Zucotti park when an enormous police force tries to clear the park is a clear example of civil disobedience². So anarchists and anarchism have left an obvious mark on the movement. And, from my experience in talking to some of the initial anarchist organizers, they like to take credit for that too. Nevertheless, OWS is not an anarchist movement, since there are so many non-anarchists involved. I heard people call the movement ‘anarchish’, which is more inclusive towards those who do not identify as such.

Are they anti-capitalists then, critics wonder, considering their condemnation of corporatism? Based on that, it is easy to assume that they condemn neoliberal capitalism as well, since corporatism would not have been possible without neoliberal capitalism. Furthermore, the popular and cheerful chant ‘Ah, Anti, Anticapitalista!’ is obviously backing up such assumptions too. But no, OWS is not anti-capitalist either, I met several Occupiers who felt that capitalism as it is now did not work, but ‘simply’ needs to be fixed instead of abolished. Many critics urge the movement to acknowledge their anti-capitalist point of view, but again, it would never include the many Occupiers who are not anti-capitalists. Are they anti-globalists then, with regards to their ‘prefigurative politics’ and rejection of party politics? But they are not anti-globalists either, mainly because the target is different (Juris 2008, Graeber 2012). OWS’s protests are not only directed at the large global institutions like IMF, World Bank and NAFTA, but at all institutions without any democratic basis, merely serving the richest 1%. Truth is that the movement does not conform to any of these labels. They resonate with them and many activists involved with OWS do sympathize with such labels.

² Source: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011112872835904508.html>, visited on: 25-07-2012

Nevertheless, most Occupiers I spoke to did not believe that choosing one of these labels to represent OWS would be fruitful. The most important reason for this has to do with keeping the movement as inclusive as possible. With regards to the diversity of the movement, from political views to ethnic backgrounds to education levels to access to resources, it will have an exclusive effect to a majority of the people when the movement pins itself down on one specific idea like for example anti-capitalism or even communism. '*We are the 99%*' does not mean, we all think exactly alike and are exactly the same. The fact that there are many anti-capitalists around in OWS does not mean that those who believe capitalism should be fixed are not allowed to make themselves heard. Every individual has the right to be heard and take part in whatever kind of decision making process. This particular basis, which the initial organizers provided for OWS inspired by Spain, Argentina and the consensus process, has been OWS' allure since the beginning. Occupiers like to refer to it as 'horizontalism'.

4.1 Horizontalism in OWS

A new form of government, as Ferguson (2009) suggests, does not simply fall from empty sky. Instead, it is borrowed from and inspired by things we have seen before. We have seen in chapter two how imagining alternatives and actually putting those ideas into practice is a huge challenge. A lot of Occupiers find themselves frustrated when coming to the point of imagining completely out of the box, which is only natural growing up under a certain type of government. The source of their dissatisfaction is obvious, namely the social and economic inequalities within societies brought upon by a flawed governmental system. However, a ready for practice alternative is not that obvious and very difficult to imagine, because most people have no idea what that alternative could look like.

So a new form of government '*involves a kind of bricolage, a piecing together of something new out of scavenged parts originally intended for some other purpose*' (Ferguson 2009: 183). OWS took from many things and ideas what they liked, whether it is from anarchism, anti-capitalism, communism, religion or for that matter, social media (Juris 2012). They put all these things to use, creating a process which is like nothing ever done or seen before, even though it feels so familiar. Actually, even the term Occupiers use, horizontalism, is borrowed from a similar process that took place in Argentina and which was called 'horizontalidad' (Sitrin 2006, Maeckelbergh 2012, Juris 2012a, 2012b). In other words, OWS's creation and practice of horizontalism could be considered as radical imagination in a very concrete and practical form and I would like to see it as an ongoing process. Exactly this process is the beginning of the alternative imagination OWS has to offer. To be

able to continue working on that process, they draw from their situated imagination, but as we shall see, they are therefore still limited by what each individual does not know or has not experienced.

But we should start at the basics. What exactly does horizontalism entail? There are many ways to describe what horizontalism in OWS means. I could describe a meeting, like a GA or another Think Tank. I can discuss the way many people try to ‘check their privilege at the door’, keeping in mind how different perspectives come into being. I could discuss the time consensus guru C.T. Butler joined our Think Tank and scolded us for reinventing the wheel. Instead I will give a sample of descriptions, to illustrate how implicit horizontalism really is.

- ❖ ‘Instead of this..’. He makes a vertical movement with his finger moving from up to down, ‘It’s this.’ He flattens his hand and moves it back and forth. ‘So, everyone is at the same level. Everyone communicates on the same level. Everyone has a voice. That’s horizontal.’
- ❖ ‘It means we don’t have leaders. Everyone is equal. You know how they say Occupy is leaderless? Actually, Occupy is leaderful, because everyone can be a leader. If there’s something you don’t like, you can stand up and go take care of it. There’s not just one person or group of persons dictating how the rest of us should do it. It’s horizontal. We all have a say.’
- ❖ ‘There’s no hierarchy. Well maybe it’s better to say that we strive to be non-hierarchical, of course there are some issues there.. But you know, especially in combination with the consensus process horizontalism is a way more direct and active form of democracy than either majority democracy or whatever kind of corporatist democracy we have right now. It’s not perfect yet. Not at all. But we’re trying.’
- ❖ ‘It’s like.. listening. To be horizontal means to listen to each other. You can’t make decisions through consensus if you don’t listen to other people’s perspectives and ideas. When you’re not horizontal, you don’t really have to listen. You can take the easy road, not listen and give away responsibility. That happens here too. But most people want to be active participants. Most people want to be part of the process. It’s why they’re here. Because here people listen.’
- ❖ ‘Well, if OWS was a business, horizontalism is what we would be selling.’

Transcript of field notes

When put into words, in part horizontalism has to do with OWS’s non-hierarchical structure and a focus on direct action. But it is not only that, it is also a mind set, a way of interpreting reality and a reflection on the way people interact with each other. The second remark on leadership is very important as well. The movement started out propagating that they were a leaderless movement and the media picked up on that. Raimundo Viejo said that where the anti-globalization was a first step, resembling a pack of wolves led by an alpha male, the model had now evolved into one big swarm of

people³ (2011). In her letter to the Occupy Together Movement, Harsha Walia (2011) warned Occupiers for the danger to deny leadership. In the long run, it might deflect accountability and conceal potential hierarchies of which people might be conscious or not. In order to build a collective and horizontal leadership structure, she suggests the movement should first acknowledge that everyone is a leader. That notion, of Occupy being leaderful instead of leaderless, has turned into a quite common notion. Upon my arrival in New York City, I participated in an OWS Orientation meeting. Jim, who introduced us newbies to the movement by explaining process and the structure of the movement, stated the exact same thing:

‘We are not leaderless, we are leaderful.’

Marina Sitrin (2012) states that horizontalism has ‘*become a word and expression used throughout the world to describe social movements seeking self management, autonomy and direct democracy*’ (2012: 74). When talking about horizontalism, in one way or another, people refer to a specific underlying notion, one that Sitrin (2012, 2011) has pinpointed since the start of the movement: democracy (Sitrin 2011; 2012, Juris&Rasza 2012). Looking back at the complex diagram OWS created to show how all of the grievances are connected, you could add another circle around it: a lack of democracy (cf. Sitrin 2012) and the loss of a neutral state; that nagging feeling that the government no longer represents its people; ‘*We are the 99%*’: 1% of the (richest) population has the upper hand in society and does not take sufficient care of the other less fortunate 99%. Horizontalism offers an alternative to that kind of ‘democracy’ in the form of a non-hierarchical direct democracy which in OWS is also based on a form of consensus process. This means that theoretically, decisions are made by general assent and without voting (cf. Graeber 2011).

Creating a horizontal space is not an easy task and no Occupier will deny that OWS is still far from a truly horizontal movement (whatever that might look like..). Becoming and being horizontal is a process and that ‘process’ is something OWS is quite obsessed with. The word is like jargon and there is even a hand signal for ‘point of process’ to address a concern about ‘process’ not being followed. But when asked what process really concretely refers to, my informants have to think very hard.

‘It comes natural.. I don’t really think about it.’ says my friend Chris, when I ask for specification. Chris is an outspoken pacifist anarchist, has Asian roots and wears glasses. This combination and his mostly black or grey outfits make him look like a smart guy. He is. And he loves to talk. He is the kind of guy that claps his hands during a meeting, starting of his speeches with:

³ Source: <http://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>, visited on 9-8-2012

‘All right! Everyone, here’s what we are going to do right now..’, followed by an eloquently put idea of how to proceed. During the initial organizing of the occupation he put together the People’s Kitchen. The first three days of the occupation he coordinated and worked in the kitchen and spent hours making peanut butter sandwiches to feed all the hungry Occupiers. When I met him, he was participating in the mutual aid cluster for May Day, organizing among other things the food, a free shop and First Aid. We could theorize endlessly on the importance of radical events. He designed an extremely complex board game: everyone is assigned a specific ideology and tactic, for instance, anarchism, communism, monarchism or capitalism and tactics such as non-violent civil disobedience, bureaucracy or free marketism. The end goal is to work together to overthrow the state, but still be the largest group standing. It takes hours of talking, organizing, collaboration and treachery to eventually lead the state to its downfall.

We are sitting on Union Square, on the other side of the park, where the presence of OWS is limited. There are some iron tables and garden chairs to sit on and around us are a couple of people chatting while having a take away coffee. A police officer just asked us for a lighter. This side of the square is less overwhelming than where OWS resides, with its music and its signs. Chris and I just finished participating in a Think Tank discussion about whether OWS was a horizontal movement and are still discussing the same thing. I ask him about process.

I guess process is a skeleton upon which we build up other things. It’s the way we have all through agreement decided how we want to conduct the conversation and to please respect these agreements. But process is also something that will just form. I mean, we organize on a pretty natural level. Like small children: they will play games that they made up with each other. And they determine incredibly Byzantine rules for these games, you know. This is just something that crops up, even in children.

But as we grow into adulthood and processes become more concrete and more institutionalized, there is the possibility that process becomes an end onto itself. Even if you might not necessarily have a formal hierarchy or something like that, a process can potentially come to represent a sort of authority over a group, right? Blind adherence to a process, that starts to become a problem. You have to remember that a process is merely a means to an end. And you need to make sure that a process will always serve you and not the other way around.

Chris

The skeleton upon which OWS builds is quite explicit and the facilitation group in OWS publishes elaborate descriptions of it. During the encampment they provided trainings as well and the training videos they made spread through the Internet, allowing occupations all over the world to adopt the same process. There are many processes: horizontal processes, authoritarian processes, economic processes, biological processes. Obviously OWS’s process is horizontal and based on

consensus. Its ‘skeleton’ and ‘agreements on how to conduct a conversation’ keep developing. For example, a lot of meetings I participated in started off with a go around in which you were asked to introduce yourself and state your preferred gender pronoun. This was done in order to create a safer space for, among others, the queer community. Not everyone felt this was necessary; I even spoke to several people who thought that making gender pronouns explicit was quite ridiculous. But a process like the horizontal consensus based process OWS uses provides space to reveal inequalities that many people are not aware of. In this case, within a society where heterosexuality is the norm, those who *are* the norm are often unaware of the ways for example a transgendered person is marginalized. Through OWS’s process such marginalizations are able to manifest more clearly, because the decision making process forces people to deal with the diversity of the 99%. Also, it is built to empower people so that they will feel like they have the space to address feelings of marginalization. That particular assumption, that the process is always empowering to everyone, is problematic and I will return to that point later. The point here is that ideally, people are forced to reflect on their own and other people’s position, because they want to find a way to work and live together in a space that feels safe for everyone.

4.2 *Facilitation: explicit process*

Remember those old Atari videogames? The ones where you control a little plateau at the bottom of the screen and there’s this ball that bounces around? You’re supposed to keep the ball from touching the ground, by navigating the platform in a way that the ball bounces back up again. Facilitation is like that. The word says it already, it means making something easier. So, imagine the conversation being the ball and as a facilitator you have to keep the conversation going by bouncing it back in space again.

Anonymous Occupier during a meeting of Occupy University

In order to facilitate a consensus decision making process and create a space that is as horizontal as possible, OWS uses facilitators. These are people who coordinate meetings, they are the ones to ‘check process’ and make sure the meetings run smoothly. Depending on the size of the meeting, people like to take a moment to introduce themselves. Something simple as knowing someone’s name tends to create a safer space faster. Usually the person facilitating quickly runs through process, which in this case refers to the hand signals. The popular media image in the beginning of the movement often spoke of OWS’s hand signals, the ‘*choreography of political process*’(Garces 2012), that is, the use of hand signals to communicate without interrupting someone who is speaking. Twinkling, stinkling, jazz hands; the collective use of specific hand signals used during meetings and GA’s. It is the most visible aspect of what Occupiers refer to as ‘process’ and in

many ways it goes beyond mere language. It requires active bodily and mental participation, even when you are not speaking yourself.

3) Intro to Process

- a) **Explanation of hand signals**, which enable communication without disruption of speaker's voice
 - i) Twinkling one's fingers in an upward motion means you agree with that is being said
 - ii) Twinkling one's fingers with the hands flat means you are on the fence; you are not sure about whatever is being said
 - iii) Twinkling one's fingers in a downward motion means that you are opposed to what is being said; you don't agree.
 - iv) Silently holding up one's hands while creating a diamond shape between the fingers means 'point of process.' This is used to signal the facilitators that the process is not being followed.
 - v) Silently raising one's index finger means, 'point of information.' It is a signal that a point of factual information the speaker has articulated is incorrect or needs further clarification.
 - vi) Rolling one's hands in a circular motion in front of the body means; wrap it up, we understand your point. This is used when someone is over-clarifying. In the interest of time, clear and concise statements are appreciated.
 - vii) Crossing both arms in front of one's self is called a block. This is done when someone has a severe ethical or moral concern with a proposal. The blocker then voices the reasons for the block, and a conversation that attempts to deal with the block ensues. If conversation has been exhausted and the blocker is clearly not willing to reach a compromise, the group moves to a 9/10 majority vote or tables the proposal. Consensus is not always reached on the first try.
- b) **Step up/Step Back:** The facilitators articulate the idea that there are people in our society who have been taught that their ideas are more important than others. Additionally there are those groups who have been conditioned to believe that they should constantly question the voicing of their own opinions. The step-up, step-back concept asks that those who often speak step back to make room for others, and that those who speak less often step up to assert their voices.

General Assembly and Facilitation Guide

The structure of OWS meetings depends on what kind of meeting takes place, a planning meeting for May Day for example has very different structure than the Think Tank meetings, because the goals of the meetings are of course very different. One is to plan and organize, the other is to host discussion and conversation. In the first, decisions have to be made, in the latter this is not the case. The general decision making process follows through five phases. It often fuses together, but in theory there are specific phases:

- 1) Proposal statement: someone prepared a proposal and states it to the meeting
- 2) Clarifying questions: in this phase there is room for people to ask questions to clarify the proposal as to understand the matter better
- 3) Concerns: when people have concerns, they can voice them during this phase
- 4) Friendly amendments: a friendly amendment is an addition to the proposal, for example providing a solution to a concern
- 5) Reiteration of the proposal, including friendly amendments

After these phases, facilitators move on to the final stage of the decision making process:

- 1) Facilitators ask for a temperature check, which means they ask the crowd to show through hand signals how they feel. That provides a pretty accurate reflection of the atmosphere, that is, if everyone participates.
- 2) Facilitators ask whether there are stand-asides. When you are standing aside, it means you do not fully agree with the proposal, but you will not block it either. If you want, you can account for your stand-aside.

During a GA I participated, the presented proposal aimed to change the GA structures. There were many stand-asides, more than a quarter of the participants. In theory, when there are no blocks, the proposal passes. But when this particular proposal passed, people got angry. They felt that somewhere along the way, process went wrong, because so many people disagreed with the proposal. Also, most of the friendly amendments were rejected. On top of that, it was a crucial change to the way the GA was conducted compared to how it had happened until then. The stand-asides felt the proposal needed more work. Often, the proposer(s) will abide and table the proposal. But this time, the proposers did not want to do that. Then four people revoked their stand-asides and decided to block (see 3) instead. The proposal did not go through.
- 3) Facilitators ask for blocks. Theoretically, a block is severe. You should only block when you have strong moral or ethical obligations against the proposal and you will leave the movement if it goes through. In practice, blocks are common. One of my informants called the way some Occupiers trifled with the severe meaning of a block: ‘selfish blocking’. When someone blocks, the blocker is asked to account for the block. The proposers then have the opportunity to take on a friendly amendment so that the blockers will revoke its block. If blocks remain, depending on the meeting, the proposal does not go through. Either the proposal is tabled or the facilitators move on to ‘modified consensus’ which is basically a nine to ten majority vote.

In rough lines, this is what the model for the decision making process in OWS looked like during my time there. At first I understood consensus process as a process of which reaching consensus is the goal. But when time passed I learnt that often it was not the decision made that mattered the most, but the way the decision was reached: *that* is what ‘process’ seemed to refer to. It is why meetings take hours. Sometimes, to be able to reach a satisfactory decision, taking the time to introduce every

participant in the group is an important part of process. During process, implicit problems become visible, with which the community has to deal together.

Depending on how you grew up, who you met during your lifetime, what kind of education you have had, how much money you have had to spend, whether you had a safe home and family to fall back on when you were young or for that matter, what kind of psychological habitation of the world you have (Appel 2012), all these factors play into what kind of person you are. It plays into the way your imagination is situated (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002). What a person has experienced, observed and learnt in life has been internalized and influences a person's imagination. Two different people with two radically different lives and imaginations are likely to come to a point where they do not understand each other. OWS's process gives room to discuss those differences. Due to the diversity of people within OWS, individuals are challenged to broaden their boundaries when confronted with someone who has a very different experience.

4.3 The problem of privilege

Of course OWS has to deal with racism, sexism and all these things! You can't just gather on a square and erase five hundred years of history.

Cornell West at the Left Forum 2012

'Disruptions', as Occupiers refer to moments in meetings where people clash with each other, are an important part of this process. When Occupiers talk about 'disruptions', they refer to moments when people are going 'off process'. It means they are off topic, maybe over clarifying, interrupting; not following process. Disruptions happen a lot, especially since OWS has to deal with including those with mental health problems or substance addictions. It is not uncommon to have someone delaying the whole meeting, because they will not stop talking, will start screaming and sometimes even become violent. Dealing with these situations takes time, for many people precious time to get something done, because they have different places to be. It can be terribly frustrating too and the need for some of the Occupiers wanting to break off into autonomous groups with people they trust seems to be quite natural.

Hannah was my 'buddy' during May Day, a huge day of action on May 1st. Our affinity group was a mix of Think Tankers and people from the working group Occupy Town Square, who organized the pop up occupations every two weeks. Being buddies meant checking up on each other during the day. In case one of us would get arrested, as buddies we would contact each other so that the other could take care of things, like calling emergency contacts and informing OWS's Jail Support.

We started out on the same picket that day, but after that we both went our ways. Hannah went to the Free University and I joined the huge march that went from Bryant Park to Union Square. Every couple of hours we would text each other, asking if everything was all right. Hannah is also an anthropologist of the daily life of capitalism. When I visited her in her office after May Day, she pulled out a big file full of flyers, hand-outs and texts she gathered and saved over the past seven months of her involvement with OWS. It was like a treasure cove. Hannah also writes blogs on OWS, sharing her thoughts and observations on what happens in the movement. In it, she explains how the label ‘disruptive’ is often applied across categories of difference. Disruptors within Occupy are mostly individuals who are homeless, have a different class or educational background or have ‘*different psychological habitations of the world*’ (Appel 2011). But even though these disruptions can be frustrating, she felt that they are at the same time very valuable. It exposes the issue of privilege, that horizontal and radical democracy contains inherent hierarchies of its own.

True radicalism is much messier, much slower and much more disruptive than any smoothly running process can handle’ (Appel 2011). When we discussed process we came upon an implicit problem I would like to call the problem of privilege. It goes back to a point I made earlier, about the assumption that this process will empower everyone.

Yes, I feel empowered by this process. That has to do with my background, the family I am from, the education I have enjoyed and the color of my skin. But there are many people, who will not automatically feel empowered by some ‘new’ process. They have been marginalized for decades, so why would they trust that this time is different?

Hannah

Chris said that he believed OWS is as horizontal as is possible now, by which he meant that the movement is not *actually* horizontal, but has come a far way. In the end, true horizontalism may not even be the point. It is the process of becoming as horizontal as possible that really matters. Identity based groups like the Queer caucus, the WOW (Women Occupying Wall Street) or the People of Color Caucus, represent groups of people who have been marginalized for decades and even centuries. Although there is much more awareness, acceptance and understanding now, the need for defending ones identity is still in place.

A lot of the sicknesses and pathologies from the outside world, like sexism, classicism, racism, they have followed us here. We’re not angels. As much as we try though, men will be taken more serious than women. People of a certain age will be taken more seriously than people who are not. White people will be taken more seriously than people of color. I have been part of these conversations, I’ve witnessed it.

I've gotten into this huge dust up with someone who thought it was funny to go into a really unflattering gay stereotype. It has followed us here and has created hierarchies in unspoken ways.

Chris

But even though it is extremely important to keep addressing these emerged internal hierarchies and be aware of them, it is worth saying that the nature of OWS's process is still more horizontal and more non-hierarchical than you can get anywhere. OWS is taking steps to deal with these issues. They do not always succeed, but at least they have created a space to do this in. Considering the scale of the Occupy movement and the way its alternative spread so easily throughout the world, its development and movement is worth understanding.

5. Methodology

Science, like art, religion, commerce, warfare, and even sleep, is based on *presuppositions*. It differs, however, from most other branches of human activity in that not only are the pathways of scientific thought determined by the presuppositions of the scientists but their goals are the testing and revision of old presuppositions and the creation of new.

In this latter activity, it is clearly desirable for the scientist to know consciously and be able to state his own presuppositions. It is also convenient and necessary for scientific judgment to know the presuppositions of colleagues working in the same field. Above all, it is necessary for the reader of scientific matter to know the presuppositions of the writer.

Bateson 1979: 27

This chapter explains my presuppositions, for I have many.

5.1 Approach to the field: the importance of stories

We see that in the past few decades anthropology has become very fond of discourse analysis. This has to do with a certain suspicion of the term culture, which tends to turn dynamic interrelated processes into a static homogenic set of practices or an integrated whole. Speaking in terms of discourse, especially in the Foucauldian archeological sense, allows anthropologists to show how groups of people and the places they are in are always an interaction and intersection between multiple discourses. It allows attention to the details of interrelatedness, acknowledges that everything is a process and values subjectivity in a rigorous way (Wimmer 2002). Wimmer (2002) has criticized anthropology's infatuation with discourse analysis, claiming that it causes our discipline to lose analytical vigor. I agree that discourse analysis can sometimes lead to tunnel vision, because of the obsessive focus on the idea that things are always changing. Instead of creating theoretical tools to enable analysis of a discursive world, anthropologists often get stuck in describing discursive practices as being discourses and do not move beyond the statement that they are ever-changing, interrelated and dynamic.

Someone who tried to develop a theoretical understanding of the world always being in process beyond the idea of it being an interaction, overlap and interrelation between multiple ever-changing discourses, is Tim Ingold (2011). He offers a different perspective on what it means to understand the world in *terms* of process. He calls the way living beings live their lives and the way things occur on earth *wayfaring*. In this idea every living thing '*has to be imagined as the line of its own movement or - more realistically - as a bundle of lines*' (Ingold 2011: 12-13). Lines are a

metaphor for the path along which living beings lead their lives. You go where life leads you and in doing so, metaphorically you always leave a track or line. Envisioned in this way, every living being lives life along a (life) line and there where people meet, the lines entwine and form a knot. Ingold (2011) envisions these knots as places, places where lifelines entwine with each other on a regular basis. To take an example of a place from OWS, Liberty Square was a place where Occupiers would meet each other and their lines would entwine. This permanent place was lost when the park was evicted, but Zucotti Park still remains a place where meetings are held and people come back to on a regular basis.

So, life is like a *meshwork* of lines: lines entwining, forming knots and places and in that way life is a continuing process of being. This idea of a *meshwork* means that if you want to understand the things in the world, you need to know the pathways they have followed to get to where they are now. Things do not exist, they simply occur. The things in this world *are their stories* (Ingold 2011). To be able to understand the things in the world means to pay attention to their story, their pathway, their different relations and their intertwining with other pathways. It means to pay attention to an interrelated context of different stories within a meshwork of wayfaring.

Instead of doing discourse analysis, I have been conscious of the meshwork of OWS. Instead of trying to understand how different discursive practices develop, co-create and oppose each other, I paid attention to stories, conversations and their underlying implications while observing the occurrences of things. In that way, this thesis does not answer a focused central question and is mainly descriptive. My stories do make an argument, as I chose to tell stories that show how OWS is a space for imagination and possibilities and the struggles of such alternative imagination. I will return to that argument in the next chapter. The point here is that I deliberately chose to come to the field without a focused question. I did not want to restrict my perspective only to certain predetermined aspects of OWS, by using specific theories about social movements, hierarchical structures or group dynamics. Instead I wanted to see which stories OWS had to offer me and go from there.

Therefore, when I say stories, I do not mean the scholarship on narrativity, stories or storytelling, which can refer to the broad academic field that aims to analyze the act and substance of storytelling itself. This kind of scholarship analyzes the structure of narratives, even puts narratives into extensive tables to outline its different levels. In other strands, storytelling is linked to representing and reproducing identity and culture, that particular kind of static, hegemonic culture anthropologists these days have become wary of. In such an understanding, stories are treated like objects that people make use of for different purposes, consciously or subconsciously. After elaborate scientific analysis they are turned into facts and theories. For example, Francesca Polletta (1998)

speaks of the influence of stories and storytelling on social movements, where narratives are the objects of analysis. She tells of how certain plots will compel people to listen to the storyteller and join a social movement. One of her conclusions is that people will turn to narratives when they cannot explain things around them properly. Polletta (1998) exported the stories that people tell from the ground and analyzed them on 'higher' academic levels. Resulting conclusions using theories and facts - which are also obtained in the same vertically integrated way - can be considered '*scientific knowledge*'(cf. Ingold 2005).

But these kinds of stories, stories that are understood as narratives and objects, which subsequently can be turned into facts and a form of scientific knowledge, are not the kind of stories I looked for. I wanted to understand *by means of* stories. I opened up my mind and let OWS tell me whatever it wanted to tell me. It told me a lot, so much more than what I have written in the previous chapters. All the things I saw, heard and felt taught me more about the movement. I could have written about these things too, about the discussions on the diversity of tactics and how people experience those. I could have written about the death of GA, the community dialogues and the attempts to take what worked and fix what did not work. I might have jumped in on emerging analyses of the meaning of the occupation of space or the practices of direct democracy (Juris 2012). I could have written about the preparations for May Day and the practice of affinity group models. I could have dedicated this complete thesis to the problem of privilege. I would have loved to write down personal life stories of some of the most intriguing people I have ever met.

But I did not write these things. I felt that, in order for the reader to really get OWS' essence, I should tell those stories on imagination first. The ones on possibilities. And on the struggles that arise from that. To move from one imagination to another alternative one is only possible when you have learnt about or experienced the latter. I experienced OWS' alternative imagination and therefore know what it can look like. But for those who have not experienced or know about it, I have told stories, so they can imagine what it might look like too.

5.2 Some ethical considerations and resonances with engaged anthropology

A specific part of this thesis, the part where peaceful protesters are experiencing aggressive and violent police behavior, is grim. Reading about this seemingly unjust violence is hopefully disturbing. I found the experience disturbing and it caught me completely off guard. Observing the scene as a researcher does not automatically provide a methodological tool to turn off one's emotions or a way to silence one's moral positions on how to act toward one another. That night and the weeks after, I found myself furious at the police and the American government, of which the police force is a

physical extension. But looking back, I realize I was upset very often, for example when Stan told me how his friend had lost his newborn baby after five weeks. When the hospital bill arrived after the funeral, he and his wife went broke, because of their lack of social healthcare. No one should go broke, for the simple and horrible reason that their baby is sick and dies. Or that time I spoke with a homeless veteran, who felt completely abandoned by the government of the country he had risked his life for. I remember I wanted to go home one rainy night when the number of police officers increased around Union Square. But when I said my goodbyes to the person I had been talking to all evening, I realized this person had no home to go back to and had to sleep on the streets. These kind of things are confrontational. I have marched so many miles during my fieldwork. They were marches against student debt, against home foreclosure, marches for immigrant rights and aids awareness. I marched for the sake of research, but my agenda was multiple. I also marched, because I felt that so many things were blatantly unfair to the majority of people and these things did not have to happen that way.

Yes, I obtained my data through participant observation, but it is tainted with an ethical premise, reflecting my own political opinions and personal identification with OWS. In *Death without Weeping* (1992), Nancy Scheper-Hughes touches on the issue of ethical premise, claiming that '*if we cannot begin to think about cultural institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless*' (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 21). It is a challenge though, to create a standard in which we can speak in moral or ethical terms, without risking neo-colonial and ethnocentric remarks or for that matter, fierce methodological critiques from fellow scholars. A few years later, Scheper-Hughes called for a militant anthropology and she then voiced her concern with anthropology's artificial moral relativism. Often anthropology pretends that its researchers are '*neutral, dispassionate, cool and rational, objective observers of the human condition*' (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 410) and it is a common view that because of that objective position, an anthropologist should never take a moral standpoint. She incisively disagrees, as do I. I have explained that I am only human too. Therefore I *will* be emotionally moved or angered as a result of my own ideas on morality. Also, these ideas influence the way my data is obtained and interpreted.

Denying or ignoring these aspects as a part of yourself - the research tool - will subsequently lead to an incomplete or even false understanding by the reader of your research. Scheper-Hughes goes on to suggests that anthropology could be both a field of knowledge and a field of action, a site of struggle and resistance (1995: 419-420), by making visible practices we dare morally disregard, like - in the case of Scheper-Hughes (2004) - the organ trade. She pleads for an engaged, and sometimes enraged, anthropology. But my research is not an example of engaged anthropology. My field in itself is already a site of struggle and resistance, addressing moral problems my *informants* have with society.

For a large part I agree with the moral problems OWS addresses and ideas on horizontalism and equality, which has made my entry into the field easier. But anthropology in the case of my research is not necessarily a way to take action in the way Scheper-Hughes has described engaged anthropology to be.

I have practiced a form of what Juris (2007) has called militant ethnography, a research method that uses a politically engaged and collaborative form of participant observation (2007: 164). The position of an academic is often awkward when working in an activist field like OWS, where almost everyone is theoretically engaged and self-reflexive as to develop and improve the movement (cf. Juris 2007). Knowledge, scientific and inhabitant (cf. Ingold 2005), is crucial, but the ways people have gained such knowledge, either through books, education, experiences or conversations, shouldn't make much difference. The position of an academic and the idea of scholarly expertise are in many ways marginalized within OWS. What really matters in the end is what actions one takes by making use of that knowledge.

5.3 Militant ethnography and anarchist anthropology

David Graeber (2005) points out how the majority of academics and scholars use their research population for the sake of their own academic career. I agree when Graeber (2005) calls those situations exploitative (2005: 509). But also, it seems to take away the possibilities of theory in contributing to certain social circumstances. In a space like OWS, the traditional role of an anthropologist simply there and observing is out of place, because informants will confront you with their expectations of you. They will ask you why you are there and what and how *you* want to contribute. In that sense, this thesis does resonate with engaged anthropology. What anthropologists should ask themselves is exactly that what my informants asked me. What will *you* contribute to the field?

But as an ‘anarchish’ movement, my fieldwork can be considered an experiment within the field of anarchist anthropology and appropriate methods as well. David Graeber (2004) has pointed out the strange affinity that cultural anthropology and anarchism have in his essay *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology* (2005: 12). Of all social disciplines, he claims, anthropology has the most potential in contributing to an anarchist theory. I find anarchism, its possibilities and its hardships intriguing for personal as well as academic reasons and many of them are to be found in OWS.

Coming to OWS for me did not only mean that I wanted to research and understand the movement, but I wanted to contribute as well. Therefore I made no pretence of objectivity in this

thesis and I did not do so during my fieldwork either. As Graeber (2004) points out, anthropologists possess the best intellectual tools to benefit the process of an anarchist, or like OWS, anarchist movement. We are trained to observe people's actions. Anthropologists are to discover hidden meanings or, more appropriate for this thesis, stories that consciously or subconsciously underlie their actions.

One obvious role for a radical intellectual is to do precisely that: to look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities – as gifts.

Graeber 2004: 12

Militant ethnography offers this possibility, making our academic work relevant to those we study. Juris (2008) suggests that 'by providing critically engaged and theoretically informed analyses generated through collective practice, militant ethnography can provide tools for activist (self-)reflection and decision making while remaining pertinent for broader academic audiences' (2008: 22). My thesis is about OWS and at the same time for OWS. The stories I have told are stories that are based on the collective practice I have observed and participated in. Through mere description I offer the possibility for critical analysis. Simultaneously I give a peek inside the world of OWS and by means of stories, I provide a different perspective of the movement than has been presented in anthropological scholarship by for example Rasza and Kurnik (2012), Nugent (2012) and Juris (2012). That perspective has to do with working from a sensitivity for that what discourse analysis tries to deal with insufficiently: that things never are, but are always becoming, in the words of Heraclites.

6. Reflections on ‘movement’

The map is not the territory and the name is not the thing named

Alfred Korzybski 1933

In a sense, my thesis struggles with a similar process of reimagination as I have described. Although my perception of reality and science is based on the process of ontology, I have still created a logical scheme – or map – through the description of some aspects of OWS, that is, a more classic scientific presentation of my data. This was required, for the purpose of applying the idea from one situation to another. To do so, I applied the logic of inversion. I turned the wayfaring of Occupiers and OWS into only outward perceivable expressions of themselves and subsequently converted those into a logical interior schema about imagination (cf. Ingold 2009, 2011). But considering the nature of the unconventional way of how I presented my data, while reading, certain questions on what kind of scientific presuppositions preceded the writing of this thesis probably developed. The ones considering objectivity, research methods and an explanation of a ‘storied’ approach are presented in the chapter on methodology. But here I account for a less tangible underlying presupposition: process.

6.1 *The logic of the imagination argument*

I pinpointed some things in this thesis; I claimed imagination to be the driving force for the movement. I took what I saw and experienced and described what that was like. Then I wrote them down following a logical scheme:

- ❖ *Contemporary American society and government are a child from thousands of years of history and economic, cultural, social and environmental processes. Now they have ended up taking actions to create and sustain a society according to a form of imagination, based on a capitalist worldview with a specific form of neoliberal governmentality.*

This first step is described in the introduction, a very brief description of how OWS came to be and its broader context, America’s form of capitalist neoliberalism, the Arab Spring – with OWS being the American Autumn –, the occupations in Argentina and Spain and the anti-globalization movements

❖ *OWS disagrees with that form of imagination (grievances can be found in chapter one)*

OWS disagrees with the way the government structures society, because it leads to broad economic and social inequality. As the ruling authorities request the movement to form specific political demands, conform the assumed dominant politics, the movement replies with the slogan:

‘All of our grievances are connected.’ That is, making specific demands will not solve the systemic problem of the richest 1% exploiting the 99% for their own benefit. Furthermore, giving in to the dominant practice of politics means giving up on certain aspects of the movement’s prefigurative politics, especially in the areas of direct action and direct democracy.

❖ *OWS tries to create a different form of imagination (which is described in chapter five)*

Earlier I described an interpretation of the word imagination as being based on transcendent imagination which made that specific situation regarding the idea of ‘impossible demands’ clearer. Later I explained the idea that imagination is an interaction between both experience and knowledge, a theory particularly suitable for what I saw happening in OWS. Some Occupiers have *experienced* certain things as a result of a malfunctioning of governmental structuring. Some Occupiers only *know* about these things and have a strong feeling of moral responsibility to occupy for a more equal and just society. Some Occupiers have both that knowledge and experience. Together they try to create an alternative, practicing a form of bricolage where they take from the old as to create something new. They developed the idea of horizontalism, an idea that will take centuries to truly function, but with which they created a basis to work with towards something new.

❖ *This is very difficult (which is explained throughout the thesis)*

An alternative imagination is difficult, because the Occupiers struggle with the boundaries of imagination. I used police violence as an example for an external struggle and explained an internal struggle as well: the boundaries of the Occupiers’ own imagination are not endless either. There are many other struggles to use as an example, like the issue of inclusivity, or the influence of misrepresentation of the media. But sadly, I had to kill my darlings to make the logic clearer.

This is my logical schema, a very lineal schema based on cause and effect.

6.2 Movement and process

Now I would like to take a moment to reflect on the word ‘movement’. Movement can refer to motion in a literal sense, a momentum, moving freely without restriction or on the contrary, not budging at all. It can mean a stir in oneself or in something physical, or a development, like moving forward (or backward..). Commotion is movement as well, like moving the hearts of masses with words, or songs, or dreams and ideals. And then of course, in the words of Anna Tsing (2005), movement can mean a group of people working towards a shared political, social, or artistic objective.

To me, Occupy Wall Street represents all these things. They are a momentum in political, social and academic dialogues. They changed the way American media and politicians talk about corporate power and created awareness on the effects of American neoliberal governmentality. They are a development, moving forward, sometimes backward, but always moving towards creativity, alternative imagination and new possibilities. They have moved many with their outcries for more economic and social justice, in provocative, inspiring and sometimes desperate ways. They empowered swarms of people to take action and responsibility for themselves and they frustrated those who do not want to.

The *movement* OWS, in the sense of all these things movement can entail, is not as straightforward and lineal (cf. Bateson 1979) as I presented my argument. In the end, things, people or occurrences are never lineal. They are wayfaring and therefore always changing. Furthermore, things are never isolated, there is always a context. Classic epistemology is no longer sufficient to describe wayfaring processes and reimagination of perceptions on scientific interpretations of reality is necessary. With stories as my approach to the field, I have collected my data in a way that resonates with the idea of *movement*. But due to a lack of a yet to be imagined method to present that data with the same sensitivity, I chose to become very explicit about movement and process here. Somehow I seek to decolonize my presented logical schema without falling back to a mere statement that everything is always changing. Instead I mean to focus on the movement and on the process and therefore tell stories that show that movement and illustrate that process.

The argument I made on imagination is like a meta-story, but the smaller underlying stories in my previous chapters all exemplify movement in themselves as well: the process of making horizontalism work, influenced by countless individual wayfarers and their ideas and experiences. The process of learning how to deal with violence and media, for example, carrying signs that no longer say: ‘Fuck the Police!’, but ‘Film the Police!’. Or the process of ‘*getting there*’, one of Ingrid’s favorite things about the Think Tank, as opposed to the other facilitators who were fascinated by the diversity of people the movement attracted or the openness of the space. I imagine she meant that it is

wonderful to see how people are suddenly able to see things from a different perspective or maybe grasp the ‘bigger picture’. All these stories and more can be found in the stories I have told, although I chose not to focus on them for the sake of clarity and simplification.

I often wonder what OWS is becoming. But this will always be speculation, because no matter what kind of data set you use, science never proves anything. We would love for reality to be predictable, for the sake of simplicity and security. This specific assumption – that reality is predictable – is what makes classic scientific epistemology no longer sufficient for me to describe the illogical, nonlinear movement that OWS represents for me (Bateson 1979: 29). So let me fall back on a rather unsatisfying conclusion. To me, Chris gave the answer right on.

We will plant the seeds. We will clear the field, till the soil and set up the irrigation. But by the time these seeds develop shoots and turn into trees, that will bear fruit and have seeds of their own, that will drop to the ground to be carried by birds, we will be long gone.

But I’ll tell you this: regardless of that fact, I would still love to see this field..

Chris

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