



**The Occupy movement and its legacy:
Populism, networks and institutions
An interview with journalist and activist
Nathan Schneider**

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The Occupy movement and its legacy: Populism, networks and institutions

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GIORGOS KATSAMBEKIS: *Would you like to kick off this interview with a few words about yourself and your involvement with the Occupy movement in the US?*

NATHAN SCHNEIDER: My name is Nathan Schneider. I am a journalist and activist. I began reporting on the Occupy movement during the planning process in August 2011, and continued to do so for several years after, writing for *The Nation* and *Harper's*. I also wrote a book called *Thank you, Anarchy* and I edit a website called 'Waging Nonviolence'. In the movement I helped organise a group called Occupy Catholics, which was a platform for Catholics interested in the movement. I have been involved in a variety of other ways since.

Would you say that Occupy was a populist movement? And, if so, what does that mean for you?

I think it depends on how you define that word. For me, it was very much so, and in some ways surprisingly so. I saw Occupy begin with a very small group of people in New York City. When I went to the first planning meeting there were about sixty people meeting outside in Tompkins Square Park. Many of them self-identified as activists. They were people who had been involved in a number of things before, and in some respects were the 'usual suspects'. What happened was that within a couple of weeks this action that they took, this thing that they helped to begin, caught fire around the country and around the world. This was not because they had organised cells in different places but because there was something about the idea and the activity and the language and the rhetoric that spoke to people in different places. It made people want to take it upon themselves to participate. In that sense I think it very much was populist. Also the support that the movement enjoyed when it came onto the scene was pretty tremendous. For a while it had higher approval ratings than the President or Congress. The level of support was shocking.

What do you think was it about the idea, or the language, that made those masses of people around the country have an immediate reaction, and mobilised them to actively participate?

Well, one part of it was the breadth of the language. I think the 'We are the 99%' chant was really important in creating a big tent; a space for lots of people to come in and bring their issues and concerns and their stories. As a result it became a real education platform, where people not only talked about the things that concerned them but also had their eyes opened to ways in which inequality and economic injustice and failures of democracy were affecting lots of other people. I think another side of it was that this was in the midst of the year 2011, which was such an

unusual moment. Things were happening everywhere; occupation movements were taking off around the world, and I think people were very inspired by that. It was a time when there was really a belief in the air that collective action could do something. I think that helped to make people from many walks of life feel that this was something they wanted to be part of.

You are talking about the ‘failures of democracy’. How much do you think that the uprising of Occupy had to do with this? And which do you – as an activist and participant in Occupy – think the primary ‘failures’ were?

I think that the Spanish movement’s motto, ‘Real Democracy Now’ really captures what all of these movements around the world were after; if there is one thing that all of these concerns can be wrapped up in. Growing up, whether you are in Egypt or the United States, and being told that you live in a democracy but then seeing evidence over and over again that you do not really have access to that sphere of power, or that so many things which people feel deeply concerned about are not on the table at all, was an experience that many young people had, and continue to have. That experience manifests in very different forms.

More educated professional class folks tended to understand things in more abstract terms about campaign finance, *Citizens United*, corporate power, and the ways in which, at the highest levels, participation is not really possible unless you happen to be associated with a multinational corporation. On the other hand, there were a lot of people who had been experiencing that difficulty directly. From the first days of the movement people were bringing in issues about racism and police brutality, environmental justice, food security. These were ways in which people experienced the failure of democracy in very visceral ways. Often the educated or more professional class folks would question that. They would say, ‘*Why are you here? This is about Wall Street. This is about finance, capital, campaign financing. Why are you here talking about this black guy who was just murdered in Georgia? Why are you talking about police brutality? It’s bad, and we don’t like it, but it’s different.*’ I think that over time people started to realise more and more that actually those things are very connected, and that they had to be able to talk about them together. Of course in Egypt too the movement that toppled Mubarak began with resistance to police brutality. There is a similar story in Greece. An early process of maturation for the movement was to discover, in the words of one of the really wonderful pieces of art, and the slogans in the movement: ‘All Of Our Grievances Are Connected.’

There has been an interesting public debate around the fact that Occupy did not have specific or concrete demands. Taking this into account, what do you think it was about Occupy that posed a challenge to the current system?

Occupy’s impact was felt on a number of levels. On the one hand the *cliché* is that it changed the conversation. And it really did. It was remarkable how in October-November and into December of 2011, and in some ways still, you just could not open a newspaper without seeing a discussion about economic equality. That was really different compared to what had been going on before. We can talk about it much more easily. Politicians are now getting elected on platforms of combating inequality, like Bill de Blasio in New York City or Barack Obama’s re-election. Whether they do anything about it is another story, but this rhetoric is very powerful. Another thing that was really significant was the way in which Occupy created a space for connection among activists and would-be activists around the

country. Young people from many different communities, concerned initially with many different issues, came to know each other. In those encampments people made connections that have continued to bear fruit. Many different campaigns, from immigrants' rights to labour organising to environmental justice are now in many cases riding on the networks that were forged in those encampments.

Finally it is really important to note that in the first week of the Occupation documents which articulated pretty well what the movement was about were passed through the General Assembly by consensus. There was not one demand, as the magazine *Adbusters* had initially suggested; as I tried to explain through my reporting on the planning meetings, the decision had been made that that had not been a good strategy to take. People did otherwise and ended up passing the Principles of Solidarity and the Declaration of Occupation through the General Assembly. I think these did a very good job of articulating the interconnections of the grievances of the movement, which were in the Declaration, and the principles that the movement would stand on and its mode of operating, which were in the Principles of Solidarity. So when people said 'What are your demands?' or 'What is this about?' it was always shocking to me that those documents, which had been passed by the General Assembly, were hardly ever cited in the media. This was very strange to me.

That may be because they were quite generic and abstract in their character. They were not articulated in the way that the public sphere is used to, such as bullet points, certain demands, certain arguments, etc. As you said they were mostly general principles. What do you think this abstract way of demanding/protesting meant for Occupy? And this question is linked to another issue here: was Occupy a call to reform the system, or rather a call for a radical break with it?

I think it was both. There was certainly a degree to which this was a movement of white people waking up to the exclusion that many other people in this society had been experiencing all along. That was in many ways the spark for, and the character of, a certain class of participants. On the other hand, I do not think that people who came in with that approach lasted long or held onto that idea for very long. I think it was a very powerful educating space, in forcing people who had certain a privilege, and had lost some of it, to recognise that they had to think more broadly. I think that was really important, and that Occupy was very effective in doing that. There were also a lot of people who were very interested, very explicitly, in system change and who saw the problems as systemic. I would point you to the book *Translating Anarchy*, by Mark Bray (Zero Books, 2013) as a really good account of the radicalisation that people underwent in the course of the movement. It has a 'Before' and 'After' analysis in it that shows how people really shifted in their analysis of the situation and their idea of what might make a difference.

You said earlier that Occupy managed to spread so quickly because it created a very broad space through the call upon the 99%, both symbolically and in terms of action. But what was the role of Occupy's 'enemy', the 1%? And how broad was that notion? It was not just the financial elite as, after all, 1% is quite a lot more than the financial elite...

I think the enemy was as broad and as poorly defined as the movement's identity itself. And that was useful, because the issue is about more than financial elites and

the financial industry. For people in San Francisco it has a lot to do with the tech industry. For people in many different communities their 1% are different. I think it was really a symbolic space rather than a factual identification. For instance, one question that came up was: *'What about the police? What about the officers who are right now removing homeless people from public space in a city that is not making any affordances for its record high homeless population?'* There was often a debate about whether the police are the 99%. Economically they are certainly not the 1%, but many people in the movement felt that symbolically, rhetorically, politically they are working on the side of the 1%.

So, this 1% was broad enough to include various aspects of the political and economic enemy. Do you think that Occupy owed much to this sharply antagonistic character? The polarisation between the 99% vs. the 1%?

Well, it was useful in its non-specificity; to not have a particular target, but to have kind of a floating target where you know it when you see it. You could point at people and say, 'You are the 1%' but just as easily you can have people from backgrounds of wealth slipping in who came to identify more with the movement rather than with the 1%. So, again, I think the vagueness was useful at that moment. I think the movement would have been a lot weaker if it had started with one policy demand because it would not have been able to incorporate so much else, such as those people who would not have identified with that policy demand.

Nevertheless, I think that this position of vagueness has its limits. A movement cannot do that forever, and it has to develop into other forms, and build other kinds of rhetoric and organisation. But for that moment, a lot of the choices that were made in the early days of Occupy were very good ones. At the time I certainly did not think so. At the time I said, *'Oh, we need this one demand! It should be this or that, and we need strong organisation.'* In retrospect I came to realise the wisdom of the group decision-making process. This was less a product of anybody's particular vision than a mishmash of various visions. Now I think we are in a moment where a lot of people recognise, much more than a few years ago, that something was awakened through Occupy. People are now moving towards much more focused ambitions, and trying to achieve concrete wins on concrete issues.

Apart from the catchy 99% I also remember the slogan, 'We the people, not the profits'. Something that brings into the discussion the notion of popular sovereignty, an effort to recapture popular sovereignty.

Language like 'We the People' also has another resonance in that it is in the preamble of the US Constitution. It is not language that everybody would have used, and one of the internal dilemmas was: *'Is this an American movement or is this a kind of post-borders or post-nationalist movement?'* I think there are many respects in which the latter was true, where people saw themselves more as global citizens than as US citizens. The language of people over profits is certainly a democratic rally. Phenomenologically, in terms of the inside experiences of the Occupy movement, the democratic moments were so tangible and so visceral. These were the emotional moments for so many people: being in an assembly with a thousand people and experiencing consensus together, or having a discussion that was difficult and wrenching but would come to some kind of interesting conclusion. I think that was very exciting for many people. Again, I think that was a very symbolic space. In many respects it is best understood as a symbolic activity, like reclaiming what the

essence of democracy is or might be. I think it was a very important one. The juxtaposition of that democratic process with the anti-democratic functioning of Wall Street was a central symbol and was maybe the central character of this activity.

Disrupting business as usual at Wall Street with this democratic process, however messy and in many ways non-democratic it was, sent a symbolic message of 'This is democracy and that is not'. I think for a lot of people that reawakened their sense of what democracy might mean. Many of us have gotten so used to the corporate representative democracy that we experience that we just think of politics as choosing between candidates picked by corporate elites. I think this movement did a lot to reawaken people's ideas of how full democracy could be. So, for example, you would speak to somebody who was starting a worker owned cooperative out of the movement. Interest in that kind of project was really spurred by this, and many people are involved in those kinds of projects. Other people are thinking about how we can bring democracy more thickly into our lives or into our workplace, rather than just focusing on the democracy of the government. One example of this is the New Zealand start-up cooperative *Loomio*, which is building open source software for collective decision making. They have been very successful and the software is now being used by governments and organisations around the world. They were an off-shoot of the local Occupy group. They not only constituted themselves as a cooperative but also made their product a tool for deepening democracy in everyday life.

You mentioned that people within Occupy did not feel themselves to be part of a national movement. They felt as though they were part of a global movement, or were global citizens. Could you elaborate further on the role of the nation and of national identity within Occupy?

I think it depends on who you ask and where you look. There were certainly people who came in with American flags and used the rhetoric of founding documents and that sort of thing. Certainly in the planning meetings before the Occupation began it was an incredibly international group. There were people who had travelled to Greece, Spain and Egypt, and others who were from Russia, Brazil and Japan. At that first meeting I saw people from all over, and they really saw themselves as participating in the global phenomenon of 2011; as joining rather than starting something new. Of course as the US media got hold of it everything became about Occupy. Occupy was American, Occupy was what was spreading around the world. Occupy was the hegemonic brand.

The media asked why Occupy was not pointing its concerns more directly at what the US government should do. One thing that one heard a lot was, '*The US government is not capable of addressing our demands because we live in an age of multinational corporations and of globalisation. This is not something that even the US government can handle. We need a global movement, and it just would not make sense to waste time focusing on our government.*' There is a degree to which that was very powerful and correct rhetoric. But once that idea is in place you still need to work within your local government in some way or another, and I think that is what a lot of people are up to now. Having that global perspective as the primary frame was incredibly important for many people, and I think was one of the great misunderstandings of the Occupy movement and that whole 2011 moment.

Talking about involvement with the local or central government, how do you think Occupy was articulated, or not articulated, with institutional politics? If I'm not mistaken, Occupy has been critiqued for being too 'purist' in a sense, hostile against institutions, NGOs, and so on; it has even been suggested that this was why Occupy faded so quickly. But did it (fade)? Wasn't 'Flood Wall Street' a continuation of Occupy?

I think yes, certainly. I was involved in organising Flood Wall Street along with a lot of other people, some from Occupy and some not. We certainly saw it as in some respects a continuation, if only because we all knew the territory so well. And tactically we knew how to handle this kind of action, and we knew how to trust each other. But it was also different in the way that you've pointed to, and I would say that this was useful. In the early stages of Occupy people were very excited by the momentum and power that they had managed to build, and they were very concerned about that being co-opted by more moderate well-resourced organisations. What happened was that attempts by those organisations to make use of the energy from Occupy were mostly thwarted and pretty viciously attacked. Then within Occupy itself funds and resources were really horribly mismanaged. Once the adrenaline had worn off those two forces contributed to a significant decline.

What happened with Flood Wall Street is something a little different. A lot of the same organisers from Occupy really worked with the large organisations that were organising the Climate March. They were not necessarily explicitly participating in Flood Wall Street as organisations, but their staff members were contributing a lot of time and even financial resources to overlap between Flood and the main Climate March. The relationships were very congenial. There was none of the anxiety of co-optation. There was much more recognition that a successful movement is going to have a slightly more radical side and then a slightly more moderate side and that you have to play these off of each other. I think that was a sign of maturation and development. It was also a recognition that if people want to push forward, especially after a few years of getting back to normal life, then they have to build organisations and institutions of some sort in order to sustain the struggle.

Following on this narrative, do you think that Occupy has failed to capitalise on its initial dynamic and consolidate its power? Or is it that it has taken on another form? That it has matured and formed networks that might not be obvious but are doing work and might be able to gain momentum again in the future?

I think it certainly succeeded in terms of creating the networks and changing the conversation. But in many respects it did not further that momentum. It let that momentum die out without being able to channel it into a next stage. Many people from the movement have individually managed to continue their work in much more focused ways, and have drawn on their Occupy networks in order to do that. But I think it is clear that for several reasons, some internal to the movement and some external in terms of repression and that sort of thing, this did not turn into a network or a phenomenon that has developed and grown as many of us would have liked. For instance, we look to examples such as SYRIZA in Greece or PODEMOS in Spain or even the Common Man Party in India, which is another example of something that grew out of a 2011 movement. It is a very odd and unusual party,

but it really has succeeded in getting itself at the table in Indian society. This is not to say that government power is the only way that this could happen...

So, do you think that you need this form of doing politics along with the movement?

I think so. The ascendancy of Elizabeth Warren in the Senate is certainly something driven by Occupy energy, and there are other signs of it at the electoral level. What I want to see even more from the next stages of Occupy is a very strong solidarity economy growing: a sector of the economy built around co-operatives and other forms of common based organising that really started to build economic power. I think that was very much in the logic and rhetoric of the movement, and to a degree it has happened. I think we are in a moment where there is much more excitement about these kinds of alternatives, even though the realities on the ground are still rather minimal and it is still a lot of talk.

How do you relate the dynamic of Bernie Sanders with the Occupy movement?

The sudden ascent of Candidate Bernie Sanders is, at least in part, another indirect-ish outcome of the Occupy explosion. I remember, for instance, just a few days before Sanders announced his candidacy, when some Occupy social-media gurus told me they were working on a 'Plan B' – which turned out to be the #FeelTheBern hashtag that catapulted the septuagenarian Sanders into an Internet phenomenon.

The Sanders campaign captures some of the best, and also some of the most troubling features, of the Occupy movement itself. The best: It reveals that huge swaths of the population feel underrepresented in the political establishment, and that those people can find creative ways to make themselves heard with joy and ferocity. The most troubling: An outburst of momentary energy can lend itself so easily to implosion and disappointment. Sanders offers us not a movement, or a revolution of culture, but just an electoral campaign, for the most part. It almost doesn't matter whether or not he wins the presidency; a campaign ends when the election is over.

Therein lies, I think, the wisdom of a participatory movement like Occupy. It doesn't respond to unrepresentative politics by merely finding a more congenial representative; it rejects the usual fixation on representatives altogether. It asks us to build a revolution organically, starting with our cities, our lives, and our livelihoods. And this is a truly liberating option – no longer must we wait for the right politician and the right hashtag. Regardless of where we stand on the legitimacy of liberal political institutions, the Occupy legacy insists that we need a politics in which politicians matter less.

[Answered via email on 31 March 2016]

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POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY
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POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments that dismiss the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes exemplify this trend. More recently, emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resist the current administration of the global financial crisis and the Tea Party movement in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project aims at the comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS adopts a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it puts forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of crisis.



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