



‘Why did it work this time?’ David Graeber on Occupy Wall Street

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review of

Graeber, D. (2013) *The democracy project: A history, a crisis, a movement*. London: Allen Lane/Penguin. (PB, pp. 326, £14.99, ISBN 9781846146633)

It has been two years since Occupy emerged on the global scene, inspired by an on-going wave of protest movements and upheavals. Like its predecessors, the movement was met with great skepticism – not least by many self-acclaimed leftist academics and journalists. How could a political movement, one objection went, be of any significance and endurance if it failed or refused to produce a clear, univocal agenda? How could it affect society or politics beyond the border of its own tent camp? Why did Occupy not even seem to be bothered with giving continuity to its own practices, for instance through initiating more durable and representative institutions?

David Graeber’s *The Democracy Project: a History, a Crisis, a Movement* takes the opposite position vis-à-vis the Occupy movement and its significance. And of course, from one of Occupy Wall Street’s (OWS) most prominent initiators and spokespersons – in the academic sphere as well as the public media – one would expect no less. But on the other hand, a first glance at the book’s cover text and table of contents suggests that Graeber may end up committing a comparable (if opposite) fallacy as the above-mentioned critics. For one of the identified objectives of this book clearly is to explain why it ‘did work’ or ‘went right’ this time. This somewhat blunt statement serves as Graeber’s point of departure, but

is not thoroughly problematized throughout the book. Graeber's analysis does, however, manifest a completely different understanding of what it means for a political movement to 'work'. His first-person account of the Occupy-movement provides us with a different reading of what it means to be involved with political action. It may help us to formulate a reply to the often-voiced consequentialist critique of Occupy and similar movements. And, moreover, it serves as a sound example of what does remain after the tent camp has been evicted: a good and important story to tell.

Why did it 'work'?

But first, let me briefly outline the overall structure and argument of Graeber's book. In its introduction, Graeber stresses that it is not simply his aim to write an all-encompassing or 'objective' history of the Occupy movement. Instead, his point of departure is an anecdotal account of one of the many failed attempts to re-establish an occupied space, long after the eviction of Zuccotti Park. Graeber reconstructs an impromptu speech he delivered at a 'post-Occupy' protest action. While improvising a brief lecture on the history of democracy in America, Graeber argues, he suddenly realized that he 'hadn't been thinking of Occupy Wall Street as rooted in any grand tradition in U.S. history' (xiv). But, he argues, this movement could indeed be placed within such a tradition. The history of the U.S. is characterized by a struggle between democratic, popular movements on the one hand, and institutionalized politics 'from above' on the other hand, which aims to limit and control such democratic expression as much as possible. Even though the founding fathers successfully prevented the U.S. from becoming truly democratic, many Americans have always remained skeptical of the idea of government. It is from this perspective that Graeber aims to conceptualize the Occupy movement – as an expression of the very possibility to act democratically against the existing order.

So how did it all 'kick off', to refer to another aphorism popular in this context? In his first chapter Graeber provides a first-person account of the preamble to – and, eventually, the very moment of – the occupation of Zuccotti Park. This account strikingly highlights the strategic discussions and considerations that eventually led to the particular ways in which Occupy was staged and organized, as well as the many contingencies and coincidences with which the movement was confronted down the road. Occupy, Graeber effectively illustrates, was neither a centrally and tightly organized movement, whose task was simply to implement a pre-set strategy, nor the overly spontaneist and unorganized street party that it became in the representation of its critics. From the 'Arab Spring' and the UK Uncut campaign to Adbusters' call-out to 'Occupy Wall Street' and

the attempts of orthodox Marxist organizations to control the outcome of General Assemblies, many different ‘external’ factors largely influenced the eventual form that Occupy took. Graeber also reconstructs how such contingencies gave rise to several of OWS’s most distinctive features – such as the famous ‘99%’ slogan and the choice for Zuccotti Park as the movement’s stage.

It is discussed at length how this movement was characterized by a strategic preference for a ‘prefigurative politics’: ‘the idea that the organizational form that an activist group takes should embody the kind of society we wish to create’ (23). Occupy was not simply the means to an end external to it. Instead, its experimental and experiential nature is singled out as its most significant aspect. Rather than to ‘come up with a vision for a new political order’, Occupy’s initiators sought to ‘help create a way for everyone to do so’ (38). Notwithstanding the many external pressures to revise its strategic outlook, the movement succeeded in sticking to its prefigurative rationale. And it is for this reason, first and foremost, that it actually did ‘work’ this time.

The second chapter, which is titled ‘Why Did It Work?’, deserves to be discussed at length. Graeber goes on to scrutinize the economic, political and cultural circumstances that – in a remarkably short time – led to Occupy’s success and visibility. Graeber thus produces seven explanations for this success. First, the movement received wide international media coverage (and was only later taken up as a major news story by domestic media), partly due to its striking similarities with several protest movements or upheavals abroad. A second explanation for the movement’s success is its generational focus. Occupy most specifically represented a highly educated generation that has always ‘played the game by the rules’, but which after the economic crises was left gravely indebted and without much of a future perspective. Third, the significance of this wave of protest carried out by educated and indebted youth is due to the enormous economic role of the financial industry, and the many ways it instrumentalized relations of debt to serve its own commercial interests. Prior to the 2008 crisis, already one fifth of the average American household’s budget was spent servicing interest payments for loans and mortgages, fees and penalties, service charges and insurance overheads – for members of younger generations this even increased up to two fifths. Needless to say, it got significantly worse after the economic system had neared the verge of collapse.

A fourth reason that Graeber identifies is that the movement’s lack of clear demands to, or engagement with, the existing political system to many people had a strong appeal. As much as the revolting generation has vainly ‘played everything by the rules’ economically, the political disappointment in institutional representation in general (and in Obama’s government in

particular) led them to experiment with other ways to address their problems and change society. Following upon this, a fifth explanation for Occupy's success was its explicit radicalism. As opposed to Arab or South-European protesters, Graeber argues, Americans could not blame their economic and political crises on any 'outside force'. For Americans, there was no other option but to argue for political change within the United States itself, and it was abundantly clear that such change would need to be more than a mere re-arrangement of the status quo. On the other hand, of course, this does not mean that austerity and the exploitation of many indebted Americans is self-inflicted. '[I]f we did not do this to ourselves', Graeber stresses, a new protest movement first had 'to rethink the question of "who" we are' (109).

It is for this reason that the '99%' slogan was so successful, as it politically repositioned many Americans and made them realize that their system only served the interests of a '1%'. Occupy's central message thus had to revolve around challenging the political power and role of money in the U.S. To focus on this political role of money inevitably entails taking a revolutionary position. 'By gathering in the full sight of Wall Street, and creating a community without money, based on principles not just of democracy but of mutual caring, solidarity, and support, occupiers were proposing a revolutionary challenge not just to the power of money, but to the power of money to determine what life itself was supposed to be about' (127). Graeber identifies this as a sixth reason for Occupy's visibility. This central chapter is concluded with a defense against the aforementioned accusation that Occupy did not 'work' after all. Indeed, many things did go wrong, but it would be a mistake to assess the movement purely on basis of its (lack of) concrete results. After all, Graeber stresses, social change takes time. 'In one year, Occupy managed to both identify the problem – a system of class power that has effectively fused together finance and government – and to propose a solution: the creation of a genuinely democratic culture' (149). To that extent Occupy did indeed work.

Prefigurative democracies

In a following chapter Graeber returns to his earlier depiction of U.S. history in terms of a continuing struggle over democracy. Notwithstanding our common reading of their work, what the Founding Fathers loathed most of all, Graeber argues, was precisely the Athenian idea of direct democracy. Once 'the mob begins to think and to reason', (163) it may as well end up putting forth radical demands that serve its own interests – such as the abolition of debt or the redistribution of wealth and property. A centrally organized republic obviously served best to keep such 'horrors of democracy' (158) at bay. Obviously, a lot

more could be said about the political history of the U.S., and Graeber’s account may at times be somewhat sweeping. But of course, the point is rather to show how throughout American history, democracy mostly took place outside of the dominant structures and institutions of power and representation. Graeber deliberately places the prefigurative experiment of Occupy within this democratic counter-tradition.

What follows is a more practical chapter on the forms and structures of organization that have characterized Occupy Wall Street. Graeber first gives an elaborate introduction into the rationale and practice of consensus oriented decision-making procedures. In a ‘Q&A’ section he further discusses some of the often-voiced objections or uncertainties regarding such direct-democratic processes (e.g. ‘What to do if people abuse the system?’). Clearly, such decision-making procedures served not only as a means to establish a predetermined end. Through the consensus process occupiers also tried to provide a certain image or model of what an alternative social order might look like.

Occupy’s prefigurative politics manifests a refusal to present demands to the existing political order – which, after all, would entail an implicit recognition of its legitimacy. Through implementing direct democratic organization directly as inherent part of political practice itself, one instead acts ‘as if one is already free’ (232). That being said, Graeber does acknowledge that ‘[i]t’s a difficult business creating a new, alternative civilization, especially in the midst of the coldest and most unfriendly streets of major American cities, full of the sick, homeless and psychologically destroyed’ (241). By endorsing a prefigurative strategy one is obviously not instantly exempted from the many forms of repression and exploitation that the capitalist order imposes on us. The ability to act ‘as if one is already free’ thus is limited from without (e.g. by police brutality) as well as from within. But nevertheless, Graeber stresses, the movement did succeed in temporarily liberating space in order to immediately ‘transform it into a space of love and caring’ (258).

For the strategy of prefigurative occupation to be successful in the longer term, however, it will eventually have to gain more continuity. Graeber pleads for the creation of a network of liberated spaces: ‘the ultimate aim would be to create local assemblies in every town and neighborhood, as well as networks of occupied dwellings, occupied workspaces, and occupied farms that can become the foundations of an alternative political and economic system’ (261). Obviously, Occupy has not yet managed to establish such a network, but several strategic options can be derived from earlier examples elsewhere (from the Iraqi Sadrist to the Zapatistas, from Bolivian populism to the Argentinian protest movements of 2001). Such examples could help us to give more durability to prefigurative

practices such as Occupy's, so that it will go on to 'work' as it did in the fall of 2011.

In the meantime, Graeber concludes in a short closing chapter, Occupy has at least been successful in one not unimportant respect: it has 'broken the spell' of a hegemonic neo-liberal discourse. The Occupy tent camp has shown that the potential for communism and democracy always is there, that 'we are already anarchists' (295). The challenge now is to expand these experiences and turn them into more omnipresent principles of organization. This, moreover, will remain an experimental process. For another valuable lesson that we have learned from Occupy is that revolutionary practice should not be mistaken for the implementation of a pre-set blueprint. It has 'worked' first and foremost because the question what exactly was supposed to 'work' always remained at stake within its revolutionary practice itself.

From prefiguration to 'figuration'?

The remaining question then is, of course, how are we to ensure the continuity of this prefigurative practice? How are we to proceed after the tent camp has been evicted? Although these questions are addressed in Graeber's book, they do remain largely unanswered. The book itself, however, serves as a good example for the work that is to be done after the political moment of movements like Occupy has come to an end. For one of the more durable things that remain after the prefigurative moment is precisely what this book offers: first-person accounts of what it means to be part of such political moments.

For there is one important difference between the way in which Graeber describes these events in his book, on the one hand, and these events themselves, on the other. Political action does not follow a clear, narrative structure with a beginning, an end and certain outcomes. It does not obviously 'work' the way it appears to 'work' when approached retrospectively, from a storyteller's perspective. A political moment like that of Occupy is a complex mash of different relations, origins, causes, motivations, outcomes, successes and failures. It is afterwards, once such a political moment has come to an end, that we can start to ascribe a certain 'structure' to it. By relating different events or acts with each other, by amplifying and emphasizing certain aspects and by articulating a language that grants a meaning to these different elements, the storyteller creates a unity, lays out a pattern which was implicitly present, but not always perceptible in the 'naked' facts themselves.

This, in other words, is the difference between actions and stories. The former are experimental and spontaneous. They may be prepared, but cannot be successfully based on a pre-set blueprint, as Graeber rightly stresses. The latter, on the other hand, obviously are composed and articulated. Stories that follow upon action, thus add something essential to it: a ‘design’ that initially was lacking. As the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero argues, ‘[t]he significance of the story lies precisely in the figural unity of the design, and in this simple ‘resulting’, which does not follow from any projected plan’ (Cavarero, 2000: 1). Cavarero therefore stresses that ‘[t]he figure, the unity of the design... – if it comes – only comes afterwards’ (144). Here, an important step is made from prefigurative action to figuration; from the open and experimental action to the point where a meaning can be ascribed to it. At the moment itself, it may have been impossible to determine if and/or why the Occupy movement indeed was ‘working’. Those judgments are left for the retrospective gaze of the storyteller.

In *The Democracy Project* Graeber once again proves himself a great storyteller. This time, he approaches his subject not merely from a participant’s perspective (as, for instance, in his ethnography of direct action [2009]), but instead from the position of one of its most prominent initiators. The insights he thus provides are both interesting and engaging. But more important is that there is a strategic use to such stories as well. For movements like Occupy do not ‘work’ evidently, themselves, they must be ‘put to work’ afterwards, in the stories that remain when the tent camp has been evicted.

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