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Dismantling Kyriarchy

*- an intersectional analysis of anti-oppression work
within Occupy Wall Street*

A bachelor's thesis by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how and in which way Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in New York City addresses issues of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and cissexism within the movement. Through a two week field study including six semi-structured interviews with key informants and participant observation, an intersectional analysis was deployed to examine the organizing structure. The purpose was to see what methods or strategies were utilized in the internal anti-oppression work and how they were successful or not in this work. Informants reported oppressive structures and unchallenged white middle-class privilege being reproduced. Historically marginalized groups were underrepresented and experienced difficulties in making their voices heard through the horizontal consensus process due to a lack of structure and accountability. Examples of strategies and methods in use to counter these problems were; progressive stack, anti-oppression trainings, identity-based caucuses and a Safer Spaces working group, all to varying levels of success. The most effective strategy was depicted through the effort called *education through practice*; to bring anti-oppression education in to everyday work rather than as singular events, and in this way slowly build a culture of anti-oppression.

Keywords: Intersectionality, social movements, anti-oppression, identity politics



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract, Keywords..... p. 2

PART I

1. Introduction p. 4

1.1 PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS p. 5

1.2 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF OWS..... p. 5

2. Previous research..... p. 6

3. Theoretical frameworks..... p. 7

3.1 DISMANTLING KYRIARCHY THROUGH INTERSECTIONALITY..... p. 7

3.2 TRANSFORMATION AND SOLIDARITY..... p. 8

3.3 PRIVILEGE AS COMFORT / SELF-REFLEXIVITY..... p. 9

4. Methodology.....p. 10

4.1 A FEMINIST LEGACY p. 10

4.2 COPERFORMANCE AS ACTIVE POLITICAL POSITION p. 10

4.3. KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWING..... p. 11

 4.3.1 The informants..... p. 12

PART II

5. Analysis.....p. 13

5.1 CONSENSUS AND INCLUSIVITY – MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE?.....p. 14

 5.1.1 Unchallenged class and race privilegep. 14

5.2 CAUCUSES, SAFER SPACES AND THE PARADOX OF IDENTITY POLITICS.....p. 17

 5.4.1 Anti-identities or identity as knowledge base.....p. 18

5.3 EVERYDAY POLITICS – CREATING A CULTURE OF ANTI-OPPRESSION....p. 19

 5.2.1 Progressive stack - pretty bandaid or actual impact?p. 20

 5.2.2 Introduction rounds with preferred gender pronouns.....p. 22

6. Conclusionsp. 23

References.....p. 25

Appendix.....p. 27

PART I

1. Introduction

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

(Audre Lorde 1984)

2011 was a year of uprising. Square occupations. New social movements. It spread like a crossfire across the globe and in September it reached the belly of the beast itself.

A poster and a hash tag with the call to “#OccupyWallStreet” turned into the largest American movement in decades. A small, concrete plaza right at the center of New York's financial district turned in to an autonomous space and home base for anti-capitalist direct action. A leaderless movement that organized horizontally deploying direct-democracy and consensus decision-making and refused to recognize authority.

To the eye of an outsider it could seem as though Occupy Wall Street (OWS) had succeeded in the crucial task of finding new tools to dismantle the master's house. However, in a country with a long history of oppression and slavery, *kyriarchy*¹ does not go away over night. Early on OWS was critiqued for being a largely white and middle-class movement, incapable of providing a safe space for women and people of color. Angela Davis held a speech to OWS at Washington Square Park on October 30th, where she posed the question: “How can we come together in a unity that is complex and emancipatory?”. Quoting Audre Lorde she replied; “Differences must not be merely tolerated but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which poles creativity can spark like the dialectic.” (Lorde 1984, p.111).

Is it even possible for a movement to be inclusive for such a large, vaguely defined group as ‘the 99%’? With this question I set out on the quest to investigate whether or not OWS could actually be successful in dismantling kyriarchy within their own ranks.

1 The term *kyriarchy* was coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza as an elaboration of “patriarchy” to express the interconnectedness of oppressions such as racism, classism, sexism and homophobia. The term will be further explained in the chapter on theoretical frameworks.

1.1 PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

This thesis is dedicated to investigate how Occupy Wall Street in New York City addresses oppressive and intersecting power structures, such as racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and cissexism, internally within the movement. Through conducting a two-week field study including semi-structured interviews with six key informants in the movement and participant observation, I examine the organizing structure using an intersectional analysis. I look at how communication is deployed in order to network, build community and make collective decisions, but my main focus is on the strategies and/or methods that are in place to deal with anti-oppression and inclusivity.

I have one main research question and the following sub-questions:

How and in which way does Occupy Wall Street work to address issues of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and cissexism internally within the movement?

- *What strategies and/or methods are deployed in this work?*
- *How are they successful or not successful in this work?*

1.2 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF OWS²

OWS consisted at the time of this study of a loose network of autonomous individuals and associations of people who, after the physical occupation ended in eviction in November, kept assembling horizontally in different indoor and outdoor spaces open to the public. The basic structure was made up by the General Assembly (GA), the Spokes Council, smaller working/affinity groups and caucuses. Simply described, the GA constituted the main decision-making body of the movement as a whole which dealt with resource allocation among other things. The working groups organized around different purposes, some dealing with practical organizing such as media, tech-ops, facilitation, food, housing; others focused on single political issues or educational purposes. The Spokes Council provided coordination between the working groups; each group would send a spokesperson (spoke) that would conclude what the group had consented upon. The three caucuses; the People of Color (POC) caucus, the Queer caucus³ and the women's caucus WOW (Women Occupying Wall street), were empowered to block proposals in the GA or Spokes Council if deemed to be racist, sexist, heterosexist or cis-sexist.

2 This is a simplification designed to give the reader a basic idea. The movement is in a constant process of change and there were ongoing discussions about changing this structure at the time of this study. To find out more about this and about OWS in general, visit nycga.net or occupywallst.org.

3 Also called the LGBTIQAZZ caucus, which stands for; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer or Questioning, Asexual or Allies, Two-spirited and Ziers.

2. Previous research

The research field of social movement studies has been criticized for not embracing an intersectional framework in its analysis of oppression and therefore failing to accurately depict movements (Hom 2011; Correa 2010). Despite this, there are several studies that use intersectionality when examining internal functioning of social movements and/or social justice organizations. Here follows a brief overview⁴ of this field, focusing mainly on a contemporary American context dating from the 60's until today.

There has already been a large amount written on the Occupy movement, among others one article criticizing OWS for failing to address questions of intersectionality (Campbell 2012), however no extended research has of yet been published. Research on the previous large social movement, the Global Justice movement⁵, has shown it to be predominantly white and middle-class, and lack sufficient representation of people of color (Martinez 2000; Alvarez et al. 2008; Pastor & LoPresti 2007). Reasons brought up as explanations include; lacking funds, long working hours, lack of child care, lack of knowledge and a communicative structure upholding a norm based on unchallenged white privilege. Members of the Direct Action Network (DAN) involved in the Seattle protest, that used the same kind of horizontal decision-making process as OWS, expressed self-criticism that the slow process of horizontality and the use of academic vocabulary does not fit everyone, and that some union people had been turned off by the “endless discussion and ‘touchy-feely’ character of the DAN discussion” (Poletta 2001).

This problem of consensus decision-making being more suitable for white, middle-class people with higher education is confirmed in several studies on organizations. In a field study about a gender and race-mixed organization, Susan Ostrander writes; “The time and emotional investment required to make decisions collectively and consensually has the unintended consequence of excluding or marginalizing people of color and low-income people, who were more likely than whites to have neither the hours nor the political inclination to use their energies in this intensive manner” (Ostrander 1999, p. 633). The conclusions she draws is that the lack of formal hierarchy within an organization actually contributes to strong informal power structures which works in the advantage of the dominating group and that therefore formalizing organizational structures is beneficial for people of color, as this gives more possibility for accountability. Hybrid organizations that have a formalized structure but still incorporate elements of participatory methods, provide a

4 For an extended overview of the field of social movement studies relating to intersectionality, see Ward 2008.

5 Sometimes called ‘the Anti-Globalization movement’, or the Social Forum movement.

possible middle-way between the two. Ellen Scott (2005) comes to a similar conclusion in her study of two mixed-race feminist organizations, adding that to minimize the risk of tokenizing people from marginalized groups, they should make out a majority rather than a minority of the group.

An interesting perspective on how ‘diversity’ has been co-opted by a neoliberal corporate management discourse, even when used by queer groups, is explored by Elisabeth Ward (2008). She writes that: ”In both realms (the corporate and the queer), the glossy presentation of diversity is often a matter of good public relations or a tool leveraged by the powerful to accomplish various ideological and institutional goals” (Ward 2008, p.7). Ward claims that this contributes to some forms of difference being privileged and those that can not easily fit in to a category will be left out. The way out is according to her to combine a queer and intersectional framework, as queer can still stand for the abnormal and the defiant, and is generally unmarketable to straight consumers. These characteristics are the reason that queerness remains invaluable as a mode of resistance.

Tokenizing, i.e. making an individual from a marginalized group into a representative of that group, is a common consequence when an organization made up by a privileged group tries to ‘reach out’ or ‘diversify’. Thus, separatist organizing, that has its starting point in the margins, has been experienced to be a better means to self-determination and self-definition. This is an even more urgent need for people that are subject to multiple intersecting oppressions that risks to be ignored in single-issue identity groups, which has been shown in research on the organizing of lesbians of color (Mott & Pulliam 2010; Hom 2011).

3. Theoretical frameworks

3.1 DISMANTLING KYRIARCHY THROUGH INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality as a theory and method of analysis has been increasingly used during the last couple of decades due to its ability to see different oppressions as being interconnected and entwined; as opposed to older models focusing on single oppressions that had rendered invisible the life experiences of women of color. Its immense popularity nonetheless calls for caution, because if used in an unreflected manner, it can play in to the same oppressive regimes that it was constructed to defeat. Nira Yuval-Davis shows that it still happens that identity categories are piled on each other in a mere additive way, such as ‘Black’ + ‘Woman’ + ‘Working-class’. She writes; “Such narratives often reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics that render invisible experiences of the more marginal members of that specific social category and construct an homogenized ‘right

way' to be its member " (Yuval-Davis 2006, p. 195). Similarly de los Reyes & Mulinari warn for the traps of identity politics, as a group loyalty presupposes simplified and fixated identity and self images; "Making social subordination into group identity complicates transboundary political action and contributes to social fragmentation, in and of that there is no common basis for political mobilization" (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005, p. 52, my translation).

Kyriarchy, derived from the Greek words for 'lord' or 'master' (kyrios) and 'to rule or dominate' (archein), is an elaboration of patriarchy to include all systems of oppressions and not just gender. It serves by enabling one to pinpoint the systemic way in which oppression rules, without having to name each and every 'ism' and its intersections, risking to privilege some over others. Cindy M. Bruns argues for the use of kyriarchy as a connecting bridge consolidating the gaps between second wave feminism and the post-feminisms; "It can address the generational differences in perspective, experience, and belief through its understanding of the influence of history and social location as part of the kyriarchial, multidimensional, morphing map of mattering and encourage honoring of differences" (Bruns 2010, p. 33). In this analysis, I use intersectionality as an analytical tool to deconstruct and attempt to dismantle kyriarchy by contextualizing how it plays in to the everyday practice of OWS.

3.2 TRANSFORMATION AND SOLIDARITY

Nancy Fraser (1995) provides us with a framework which clarifies why struggles for redistribution (economic justice) and recognition (cultural justice) must go hand in hand, and struggle for *transformative* rather than *affirmative* remedies to the inequalities at hand. Affirmation, as seen exemplified by the liberal welfare state and mainstream multiculturalism, uses surface reallocations to address inequities, leaving the underlying framework that generates these inequities intact. Transformation on the other hand, strives for a deep restructuring of relations of production and of recognition, in Fraser's grid represented by socialism⁶ and deconstruction.

Chandra Mohanty (2003) argues that global capitalism of today is dependent on and exacerbates racist, patriarchal, and heterosexist relations of rule and that the analysis needs to begin with the lives of the marginalized for our visions of justice to be inclusive and not nurture the blindness that privilege prevails. Thus, her argument calls for the need of not to forget or minimize the issues of

⁶ I would argue that anarchism might as well as socialism occupy that space in the grid, as it also seeks; "deep restructuring of relations of production; blurs group differentiation; can help remedy some forms of misrecognition" (Fraser 1995, p. 87).

marginalization of different groups of people as "special interest" thinking, or divisive in the larger anti-capitalist struggle for global justice, but rather that this has to be the starting point for this struggle to ever reach the goal of total inclusivity and the end of oppressive regime. Mohanty's response is a feminism across borders, linked together through solidarity;

I define solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here – to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances.

(Mohanty 2003, p. 7)

3.3 PRIVILEGE AS COMFORT / SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Critical whiteness studies has pointed out the invisibility of white privilege to those who possess it, and the subconscious ways that it operates. Sara Ahmed (2007) describes it through the feeling of *comfort*. Being comfortable is to sink down and lose the sense of having a body, because the body *fits in*. To not fit in will make one feel uncomfortable, and therefore painfully aware of one's body and the actions one performs. She also points out that whiteness is only invisible and 'unmarked' for those who are seen as white, and for a person of color to, as she puts it, enter a 'sea of whiteness', the color of skin will not be without importance. This analogy captures the subconscious aspects of how privilege/oppression works on an individual psychological level. The privilege of being comfortable that renders normative positions of whiteness, masculinity, middle-classness, and heterosexuality invisible, points to the importance of *self-reflexivity* as a process of working against implicit and internalized social structures of privilege and oppression. Mohanty emphasizes "the centrality of self-reflexive collective practice in the transformation of the self, reconceptualizations of identity, and political mobilization as necessary elements of the practice of decolonization" (Mohanty 2003, p.8) and that: "history, memory, emotion and affectional ties are significant elements of the construction of critical, self-reflective, feminist selves and that in crafting oppositional selves and identities" (Ibid.).

4. Methodology

4.1 A FEMINIST LEGACY

I have drawn inspiration from a combination of feminist qualitative research methods, social movement research and critical ethnography. My main method, qualitative semi-structured interviewing has a long tradition within social science and in feminist research as it enables an explorative approach that maximizes discovery and description (Reinhartz 1992). In the tradition of feminist methodology and epistemology, I adhere to the belief that all knowledge is situated in time and place and is therefore relative to historical and contextual factors. Donna Haraway (1991) coined the concept of situated knowledge, which despite being slightly overused has played an important role in making researchers turn for the more honest, to admit one's own position and bias, and to let readers be aware of one's subjectivity and if there are any political or personal aims behind one's intentions. Therefore I follow in this tradition of positioning my self in relationship to the field.

In this web of power dynamics that mark and shape our bodies and subjectivities, I find myself in a position of relative privilege. As a young cis-female, mostly heterosexual practitioner, white, ethnical Swede, with a middle-class upbringing and a university education, I do not see myself as having a 'privileged stand-point' when it comes to speaking for marginalized groups. I am myself in a position of comfort, of being unmarked, and never gets called to be questioned when crossing a border. For this reason, I struggle to be self-reflective, to scrutinize myself and my privileged position, and to be open to critique from less privileged voices. However, despite my efforts to do so, I can not guarantee that I will never express ethnocentric views, nor do I believe that I will ever completely rid myself of the bias of privilege. But as Diana Mulinari writes, this should not justify avoidance of studying these matters;

To analytically understand the consequences of ones own narrative during the gathering of a life history or during a conversation that takes place within the frame of participant observation in a context where class, "race"/ethnicity, sex and generation are central principals of hierarchical social organization, is a completely different scientific project than to claim that one's social identity hinders one from understanding certain social phenomena and of getting close to certain social groups.

(Mulinari 2005, p. 116-117, my translation)

4.2 COPERFORMANCE AS ACTIVE POLITICAL POSITION

While doing interviews, I participated actively in the movement during the 16 days I spent in New York City. Despite the short time-frame, being in place was of great importance for my

understanding and provided a contextualized background to the interview material. Being a dedicated activist of the greater Occupy-movement, through my participation with local Occupy Malmö, and with a personal drive towards fighting against capitalism and for social justice, I chose to take part as a co-performer rather than just a passive observer in political actions and protest marches. I also participated in informal social gatherings in private settings and made good friends with several “occupiers”, which helped me gain better insight and different perspectives. Here I relate to what Madison writes about coperformance in ethnography; “Coperformance as dialogical performance means you not only do what subjects do, but you are intellectually and relationally invested in their symbol-making practices as you experience with them a range of yearnings and desires” (Madison 2005, p. 186).

4.3 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWING

The sampling of informants was made using a snow-ball method, the contacts I had in the movement prior to arriving advised me of who to talk to within the movement that possessed a lot of knowledge or had organized around issues of intersectionality/anti-oppression work. I chose to carry out semi-structured key informant interviews, because according to Blee & Taylor (2002), key informant interviewing works well if the purpose is to examine social psychological and/or organizational aspects, such as a movement's structure, strategies and culture. They also claim that the presence of key informants is a way of gaining access to a large amount of descriptive information in a more time-efficient way than a more extensive interviewing model would. These factors all point to the utility of the methods in my specific study. The interviews took place in different locations, some of them in the home of the informant, some in a public place such as a café or a park. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed in detail. The informants were given information about their participation in the study, that they could decide to withdraw completely from the study at any given time, or just withdraw specific information. They were given the choice to remain anonymous, however all of the informants wished to be represented with their real names as they are already public figures. The interview guide⁷ was loosely structured and no interview was conducted in the exact same way but differed according to the context. The interviews were informal and relaxed conversations to their nature.

After transcribing the interviews, I did a few extensive readings of the written material, where I coded the text according to reoccurring themes and selected keywords that helped me in grouping the results into categories. I picked out quotes that shed light on the selected themes that I then

⁷ See appendix A.

related to the theoretical framework and the previous research on the field previously outlined in this paper.

4.3.1 The informants

Here follows the list of informants in alphabetical order including their preferred gender pronoun, ethnic origin and their position in relation to OWS.

Melanie Butler. (she/her). Caucasian American. Started the Speak-easy caucus, active in the Women's caucus and Safer Spaces, worked at Code Pink, a feminist peace organization that took part in the occupation.

Suzahn Ebrahimian. (they/them). Iranian-American. Part of The Direct Action working group (DA), started Feminist Direct Action (Fem DA).

Karanja Gaçuça. (he/him). Nigerian. Part of The People of Color (POC) caucus and the PR group.

Norhan Hassan. (she/her). Egyptian-American. Moves between groups, was a part of Fem DA, among others.

Manissa McCleave Maharawal. (she/her). Indian-American. Part of The POC caucus and Safer Spaces.

Amelia Sabine Rebelle. (she/her). Caucasian American. Trans-woman. Part of the DA, started the Queer and Trans Direct Action group.

PART II

5. Analysis

“This is why I have been so torn up and taken a step back because like why do I have to take it on myself to make the most popular, anti-capitalist, anti-corporate, economic justice movement in the United States in decades open to marginalized groups? It makes no sense. Why is this like a white, straight, middle-class movement? And why do I have to waste my time dismantling patriarchy and national privilege and all of these things every time I want to get something done?”

Suzahn

“I really hate the fact that any time I go in to activism like this, where it's not specific to the trans community, I am always sort of forced in to the role of doing anti-oppression work in the movement and not actually doing what I would like to do. And it's really frustrating because it further perpetuates this whole like you know.. the people who have privilege get to actually plan where things go, meanwhile those of us who don't, get stuck with dealing with everyone else's bullshit.”

Amelia

The horizontal non-hierarchic structure of OWS appears, at least formally, to be a movement open and inclusive to all. However, accounts show a more complex picture. A general sentiment of disillusion was experienced by several informants and is exemplified in the opening quote by Suzahn; showing disbelief over why anti-oppression work was not a natural part of OWS. Many felt disheartened about the lack of knowledge and understanding of how interconnected all other forms of oppression are with the functioning of today's economic system. None of those interviewed were entirely satisfied with how issues of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and transphobia were addressed within OWS, with some seeing no hope for OWS ever really addressing their problems, and that autonomous organizing outside of Occupy might be the only way. Others however did express a more positive out-look, telling about times when methods had been successful and had hopes for the movement becoming more inclusive with time and effort. An example of a more hopeful approach came from Melanie:

“I think what does make this movement different from most that I've organized in, is that there is a genuine wide spread, not complete and total, but very widespread commitment to doing things better.. and to recognizing that we want to, [that] we are committed to doing things in a more sustainable, more compassionate, anti-oppressive way.”

Melanie

She was not the only one that expressed a certain hopefulness that at least the intentions were there, but in general the sentiment seemed to be that if OWS was ever truly going to be an inclusive movement, there would be a need for much more commitment from all directions for anything to actually change. In the chapters that follow I will focus on a few strategies and methods that are deployed by the movement and the outcomes of these.

5.1 CONSENSUS AND INCLUSIVITY – MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE?

“I guess people are really unaware of the fact that they are creating the structures that are oppressing them in that they get so attached to structure and process... I've always said that, you know, we had so much focus on being a leaderless movement but we forgot that leaders are not always people... /.../ we definitely have cultural norms as our leaders or, you know, the mainstream, or these ideas or these structures, like congress or whatever. So that's kind of what happened to the GA and the Spokes Council I think. Yeah, so I don't go anymore because mostly it evolves into fist fights and people screaming about money so... (laughs) It's not a very enlightening place to be!”

Suzahn

In the beginning of the movement, the General Assembly where nothing was predetermined but everything was decided upon collectively through reaching consensus, was what attracted many. After the eviction when there was no longer a common space that needed constant coordination, the GA had declined and many had, similarly to Suzahn, stopped attending it. In fact, many of the meetings I attended were exclusively dedicated to reforming or completely disbanding the GA and Spokes Council because of the large difficulties that were experienced with them. The main concerns brought up were that they were consumed by arguing and negative energy (especially when about money), not enough people were showing up, which in turn led to losing trust and legitimacy as being able to represent the larger movement. However, what was most prominent in these discussions was the fact that the consensus decision-making process is not fit for large and constantly shifting groups.

That there can be problems within consensus-based organizations has been shown in previous research (Ostrander 1999, Scott 2005). Scott names three major ones, namely; 1: Informal hierarchies tend to form in the absence of formal structure, privileging those with more experience and friends in the group. 2: “Smooth collective decision making requires homogeneous groups of people who perceive their interests to be shared” (Scott 2005, p. 237). 3. Inefficient decision making makes the processes long and cumbersome. All of these three aspects were observable within OWS, but they were further exacerbated by the lack of continuity in the GA. The principle of inclusivity, that everyone is welcome, had thereby become a problem that halted the decision making process of the movement. One of the solutions that was proposed was to stop making centralized decisions completely.

5.1.1 Unchallenged class and race privilege

Scott raises the issue how the previous mentioned problem factors with unstructured collective decision making can lead to people of color abandoning organizations for reasons connected to class, such as not being able to volunteer one's time in the same extent as middle-class whites, and

thereby falling down the informal ranks of hierarchy. What Jo Freeman called a ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ (as cited in Scott 2005), also makes it harder for people of color to challenge racism (overt or covert) and white privilege within the organization as there is no one who is in charge to be held accountable. Lack of accountability was also something that was frequently brought up as a problem in the interviews. Suzahn says that the OWS horizontal structure might look good and seem equal on the surface, but that this does not always apply to practice:

“I know that a lot of the people that I work with, or don’t anymore work with, still can use these structures in an oppressive way because they haven’t taken a step back to like look at themselves, and like understand that process does not build relationships and process is not inherently anti-oppressive.”

Suzahn

The ‘structurelessness’ of OWS might explain why people of color are underrepresented within the movement or decide to leave it. In the article “A Critique of the Occupy Movement from a Black Occupier”, Emahunn Raheem Ali Campbell (2012) warns that OWS and the wider Occupy-movement might fall on its own failure to address white privilege within the movement. He points out that it is, in its current state, a white-led movement dominated by white middle-class youth, and tells of a compact silence and a reluctance to openly examine itself. Campbell concludes that people of color historically have proven to be more attracted to organizations with a clear structure and goal which is confirmed by several studies (Pastor & LoPresti 2007, Scott 2005, Ostrander 1999).

However, this should be interpreted with caution. It does not imply that more loosely structured, consensus-based collective organizing are *inherently* bad in and of it self, nor that Black people and consensus decision making always will be a bad match. As Stuart Hall writes calling for intersectional analysis; “The end of the essential black subject also entails a recognition that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories of class, of gender and ethnicity” (Hall 1992, as cited in de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005, p. 59). Race has historically been intertwined with class, and is particularly pronounced in the US, with its long history of racial segregation of labour, and that is still heavily present in the disproportional poverty among Black and other people of color and the overrepresentation of people of color in the prison industrial complex. These are structural inequalities that makes it almost impossible to talk about race without talking about class.

Campbell's critique of white privilege going unchallenged in OWS proved painfully right through the story of a few women being targeted in the general meetings because their behavior was deemed to be “disruptive”, which led people in the GA or Spokes Council to try to expel them from the movement. Karanja tells the story:

“And the movement has been, it seems, consumed /.../ with just trying to find a way to kick out a few people out of the movement. And these few people all happened to be women of color. And we [the POC caucus] were pushing back against this, and it seemed as if though every single attendance at Spokes Council or at GA, was people of color trying to make sure that certain people of color were not exempted from some sort of resources, you know like housing, people were kicked out of housing /.../ or not being given access to metro cards”

“There were these particular three women for example, one of whom, in my heart of hearts, I fully believe, was somebody who.. she could just not follow the processes, the protocols that had been established for communication, so she was always yelling about something, but she was always pushing and fighting”

Karanja

The woman mentioned above had been very suspicious of the processes of OWS and was concerned that the money was not being dealt with in a responsible manner and she was constantly demanding an audit of the financial situation. The reason that Karanja and other people of color in the POC caucus perceived the targeting of these women as being racist, was because they felt there was a lack of understanding of the whole dynamics behind their behavior. Manissa agreed about these events being highly problematic, even though she concludes that it was a complicated matter that was not so easily managed, and that she herself did not know exactly what to make of the situation. In the following quote she demonstrates how cultural norms of conduct played in to it.

“I had this conversation with my friend who, was in POC and.. who was like; ‘I went home over break and I was hanging out with my mom and we were talking, and I realized that the way we were talking, she would be called disruptive at Occupy...’, you know.. and I was like thinking about it and I was like, actually, yeah. The way that I fight with my family, the indian side of my family, would be called disruptive. There are certain ways that Occupy has a culture of its own, that is like.. that normalizes some ways of acting, and makes other ways of acting deviant, you know, and the fact that the three people who were tried to be kicked out of the movement were all women of color – something is going on there that needs to be thought about.”

Manissa

An activist from DAN, the Direct Action Network in Seattle that used the same principles of consensus as OWS, told the following of their experiences with class privilege being an obstacle; “Sometimes people have come to a meeting and left because they felt we were using academic terms or specialized language and they considered it classist” (Brooke, as cited in Polleta 2001). The problems that are experienced with not having time to attend long meeting, or to volunteer, or not affording taking time off work (Martinez 2000), or not being able to follow process, such as the women of color that were being excluded from OWS, are all related to education, income and class culture. However, if they themselves pointed out the race and gender dynamics, it only led them to be further marginalized;

“I can see how those particular women were so demonized, because the more they cried, the more they were attacked, the more they said: ‘Well, would you do this if I was a white man or if I was a white woman’ and the more they did that, the more people just panicked and really needed to demonstrate just how completely irrational and how completely crazy these people were, so they attacked them more, and they provoked them more even... sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly.”

Karanja

Despite all this, it would be foolish to claim with certitude that horizontal and collective decision-making is all bad. Considering how socialized we are in to hierarchical forms of organizing, we should not give up too soon on trying out and developing other methods. The consensus process has proved to work when applied in smaller groups or groups where there is continuity, where relationships of trust can be built. The Direct Action working group at OWS was an example of a group where the consensus process worked smoothly, according to those who were a part of it. This was due to it being a smaller group of people and it being relatively homogenous in that they shared similar political views (most of them were anarchists) and many of whom were good friends. But also, Suzahn concludes;

“...because of the fact that we made so many concrete systemic and process-based steps for horizontality and anti-oppression, which was key, our group attracted a lot of people who wanted to be involved”.

Amelia explains why she felt that the DA was a safer space for her than the more open meetings;

“People within direct action /.../ usually tend to have a broader, more holistic analysis of social issues and are also a lot more dedicated on average. /.../ they make a point of listening and that is something that is really sort of fostered I guess in our internal culture, the direct action group has really built this sense of community around it”.

5.2 CAUCUSES, SAFER SPACES, AND THE PARADOX OF IDENTITY POLITICS

“We need this space because there's a lot of messed stuff that is happening and we need a space to talk about it”

“There were certain things we never had to say, like there were certain starting points for the conversation which were different than the starting points that you have in other conversations. And that really mattered.”

Manissa

“Why is it always just a group who is being victimized, and naturalized to gain some autonomy - and why can't it just be the general understanding that we need to fight these forms of oppression? So the caucus becomes a safe haven for radical and marginalized individuals, yet in the same sense, their voices become marginalized through that space in and of it.”

Norhan

The creation of caucuses for specific identity groups came out of a need to surround oneself with people in the same situation who experienced the same form of oppression. In the first of the two quotes by Manissa above she is explaining some of the reasoning that led up to starting the People of color caucus, as surging from problems within the larger movement. The second one speaks to the necessity of that space, and the relief of not having to explain to someone what structural racism is and what it does, before being able to speak about it. However, I see a tension here, between the positive aspects of organizing separately and creating a safe space for oneself, and the presence of the oppressive structures that create this need, which is further developed in the quote by Norhan. This is the classic paradox of identity politics; or what Nancy Fraser chooses to call ‘the recognition-redistribution dilemma’ (Fraser 1995); the wish to reclaim and upgrade the value of an identity that has been suppressed and devalued, while at the same time wanting to break down those

same structures that have marked that identity to be separate. Suzahn expressed double feelings when relating to the caucuses, on the one hand they like the idea of them because they understand the need to organize with people who share the same experience, on the other hand they thought it indicated to be a “huge flaw in the structure” that these groups are needed at all.

“I think that caucuses can only really serve a purpose if there's a system that's diverse but kind of holds one perspective as normative and that's kind of an oppressive perspective.”

Suzahn

5.2.1 Anti-identities or identity as knowledge base

“I think that building a positive identity is something that you do for other people. Right? It's something that you inherently do so that other people can identify you and so then you can figure out where you fit, what issues affect you and how. But I don't actually think that is much of an identity, I think that's more of like.. something that we're forced to do because we live in this fucked up system.. so I actually don't think it's possible to build a positive identity in that way without essentializing yourself, because we're working with these constructions that are inherently built on essentialization.”

Suzahn

“A big problem is if people say that ‘this is a safer space, so therefore our identities aren't what's important’ or how we're seen as a race, or how we're seen as a gender, or how we're seen as a class doesn't matter – that is actually erasing the entire identity because if you are marginalized within any sort of statistical oppression /.../ that scopes the very real vulnerabilities and strengths of your experiences, so anything that considers itself separated from that, actually perpetuates the same forms of cultural violence and oppression by saying that we can erase those identities and that they don't matter in our conversation; [that] won't make a better conversation in that we're all the same, [it] just decontextualizes everyone and we don't grapple with the context of our reality. And these are not safer spaces, they are safer delusions.”

Norhan

These two different stands on identity both point to crucial problems of the politics of identity and demonstrate, I think, the profound complexity of the matter. The quote by Suzahn, which was in response to a question of how they deal with the paradox of building positive identity and at the same time wanting to tear down identity entirely, they claim it impossible to avoid essentialism in reclaiming a previously derogated identity and turning it in to a positive one. They echo Nancy Fraser in her denouncing of mainstream multiculturalism; “This proposes to redress disrespect by revaluing unjustly devalued group identities, while leaving intact both the contents of those identities and the group differentiations that underlie them” (Fraser 1995, p. 82). Suzahns own strategy was instead to claim what they called a ‘non-identity’ or an ‘anti-identity’, a common positioning in queer-feminism;

“So the most I will do is call myself an anarchist which is like, the word in itself, a non-identity because it means ‘without’, – government or whatever, so it doesn't actually imply anything. Other than what it's not.”

Suzahn

What Norhan makes explicit in her statement, is the impossibility to escape the material reality of bodily differences that shape how we are perceived by the outside world, and which in turn also shape how we experience the world, and the very people we become. Attempts to exit from categorical thinking can risk to delegitimize people's lived experience as a source of knowledge. It

also points sharp critique against the concept of color- and gender blindness that is so prevailing in US society, a standpoint often coming from the very people who are in a privileged position of comfort, being unmarked by society as not having a colored/sexed body. In criticizing what she calls a ‘careerist academic feminism’, for creating a class gap between women's movement and feminist theory, Chandra Mohanty writes:

Finally, the critique of essentialist identity politics and the hegemony of postmodernist skepticism about identity has led to a narrowing of feminist politics and theory whereby either exclusionary and self-serving understandings of identity rule the day or identity (racial, class, sexual, nation, etc.) is seen as unstable and thus merely ‘strategic’. Thus identity is seen as either naive or irrelevant, rather than as a source of knowledge and a basis for progressive mobilization.

(Mohanty 2003, p. 6)

Black feminist theorists have since long claimed their position as one of epistemic privilege when it comes to describing oppression, through coming to the academia from the margins, as the *outsider within*, with the words of Patricia Hill Collins, they are able to see both the position of the oppressed **and** the position of the privileged (Harding 2004). These are certainly valid claims, however I do not necessarily believe that they are mutually exclusive to ideas of deconstruction nor to the right to choose how to self-identify, in the way that Suzahn do.

5.3 EVERYDAY POLITICS CREATING A CULTURE OF ANTI-OPPRESSION

“Everyone in the movement needs to step up in some ways, and take this stuff on as not like the issue for people of color, the issue for queer people, the issue for you know anyone else, but everyone's issue. And if you're my ally, that's the way you think about it. The allies in this thing are those who are like.. thinking about this as not just something that happens in a training, and then you learn it and then you're good, and then you can move on, but as people who are like; ‘This is what we deal with everyday and even if I'm really privileged that means that I have more responsibility to be dealing with this stuff rather than not’. And so I think it needs to be more in our sort of like everyday politics. Not just in trainings or in big meetings, but in the way we even like, interpersonally deal with each other you know.”

Manissa

When asking the question of what methods of anti-oppression were in use by OWS, it became clear that there was never going to be an all-encompassing methodology which would eventually ‘solve the problem’. Rather it was commonly emphasized that it was the small everyday practices adding up to slowly build a culture of anti-oppression. Melanie told of how they in the Safer Spaces working group would call this ‘education through practice’, meaning that anti-oppression education needs to happen as an organic part of everyday work and not as something superficially brought up in a workshop or training. As an example she referred to the process that Safer Spaces went through to create a Community Agreement⁸ for OWS. It started with a proposal from Safer Spaces, that went through all the working groups to be workshopped and processed, until after three months of

8 “Occupy Wall Street Community Agreement”: <http://www.nycga.net/occupy-wall-street-community-agreement/>

sending it back and forth with amendments and changes, the final document was passed by the Spokes Council on February 22nd.

“They had to engage in the conversation about what it was about because it was fundamentally about all these concepts, about recognizing privilege, and those were you know, contentious issues for some people, some people really wanted to take the most important parts, which were about privilege, out. So that necessitated us talking about it and so that, in it self those conversations were like anti-oppressive trainings, that education through practice method, /.../ I think is a, much more effective way than just doing an anti-oppressive training..!”

Melanie

Focusing on the everyday work seemed a more effective strategy than conducting anti-oppression trainings or workshops on racial inequality as singular events. Many expressed that these trainings would never really reach the people who actually ‘needed them’ but would mostly end up preaching to the choir. Norhan's view was that they were merely a sort of “alleviation of guilt“, to make people feel good about themselves. Karanja even told of a bad experience at an anti-oppression training where he was treated rudely and was constantly shut down by the trainer. After the workshop he had approached the trainer and asked her about it in a polite manner, subsequently getting the reply that she had thought he had showed up just for dinner, and that she had assumed he was a troublemaker.

“...and I thought what hope is there, if the anti-oppression trainer can see a black person that they've never met before and say that ‘this is a trouble maker’.”

Karanja

The process to work towards creating a culture of anti-oppression, was a constant struggle that all of these organizers strived to do, and how they dealt with it was, among other things, through introducing ‘small things’ - methods or strategies of everyday practice in order to try to change hegemonic structures upholding privilege and oppression. Here I will further out-line and go through some of these small methods.

5.3.1 Progressive stack – a pretty band-aid or actual impact?

Progressive stack is employed in meetings as a means to manage the conversation in ways so that not only privileged groups and confident speakers will do all the talking. There did not seem to be any unified way or set of principles of how it was supposed to be used. Many of the informants commented how it was up to the person taking stack, and how this gave a lot of power to the stack-keeper. Progressive stack is connected to the praxis of ‘step up/step back’, in the sense that people are encouraged to self-monitor their own speaking time – to ‘step up’ if you have not spoken before and to ‘step back’ when realizing you have spoken a lot. How to make traditionally marginalized groups to speak up was a trickier question, and this was the inconsistent part of the use of

progressive stack. Some stack-takers would ‘bump up’ people belonging to less privileged groups, such as women and people of color (meaning they would get to speak faster). But this practice implies that, in Amelia's words:

“You have to sort of assume what people's backgrounds are, what kind of oppression they face, which I think is the reason to why a lot of people haven't really done it on that basis really”.

Amelia

This practice will privilege some differences over others – oppressions that are explicitly visible, that are *written on the body*. Elizabeth Ward discovered in her study of LGBT organizations in Los Angeles how;

Even progressive activists are compelled to revert to instrumental conceptualizations of difference, privileging those forms of difference that have the most currency in a neoliberal world and stifling differences that can't be easily represented, professionalized, or commodified (Ward 2008; p. 2).

This includes those kinds of differences that might not be visible, such as a psychiatric disability, or class. It also assumes, as manifested here by Suzahn, that people of color and women *by default* will have more difficulties in raising their voices than do white men;

“To come in to a space with this idea of step up step back, is like; ‘ok, white men need to step back and other people need to step up’, is assuming inherently that the space is for white men and that we have to like add our voices to this space /.../ Why do we automatically assume that, in a revolutionary space, that white men are the ones that need to step back – like, I don't get that, so for me it just sets out this whole alarm in my head where I'm like, ‘Oh god, we're really coming at this from a weird angle here!’”

Suzahn

However there were also positive accounts of times when it served its purpose. Both Melanie and Manissa told of times when they themselves had been helped in raising their voices, when progressive stack was used in a more pro-active way. In these cases the stack-taker would, if seeing that they had only white men on stack, alternatively people who had spoken a lot, proclaim this openly and ask if somebody else would like to get on stack. Melanie remembered having an announcement to make that she had been putting off, convincing herself it wasn't so important, but when called upon in this manner, she suddenly felt compelled to take the opportunity to speak. Similarly Manissa expressed relief of how, when a meeting started doing progressive stack after starting off with a long informal open discussion, suddenly she would hear the voices of people who had not said a word during the first half of the conversation.

Nonetheless, if progressive stack is seen as an end in itself, a “merit badge of how radical your space is”, as Suzahn put it, rather than as a means of facilitating conversation and helping people to express their opinions, it can be reduced to just its face-value. Karanja's experience of it carries resemblance to this approach;

“Progressive stack was a beautiful band-aid, a beautiful patch that looked like it was providing equal... – like it was solving the issues, but it was just a band-aid. It's pretty, in the public setting of GA, but essentially, resources, real resources have not been divided up, real time for voices to be heard, i.e. media interviews have not been shared progressively using progressive stack. So it might be used in a pretty way during meetings, where people are sort of ‘Yeah yeah, ok, we heard you, alright move on now, let's really hear the **real** important issues...’”

Karanja

5.3.2 Introduction rounds with preferred gender pronouns

“I even think little things like starting meetings with gender pronouns, I think little things like that really matter, like that's a moment of reflection, you know, and it's a moment of liberation too, like: I present as female, but I like when we go around and say gender pronouns because that's like a moment of liberation for me too, where I get to be like ‘Maybe I present as female but maybe I don't identify that way, like fuck you.’”

Manissa

“You know it's such a little thing, but it's big, when you start - when people who have never questioned what a gender pronoun is, or why someone would prefer one gender pronoun over another, and had never heard a gender-neutral pronoun, you know, it was really powerful, to just have that at every meeting, to just have that little wake-up call of like ‘Oh yeah, I shouldn't make assumptions of people's gender based on what they look like’, right!”

Melanie

Manissa's and Melanie's accounts both point to the large impact a seemingly small thing can have, as having an introduction round where people are asked to introduce themselves with name and their preferred gender pronouns⁹. This was echoed by others as well, and was a practice that I observed being deployed in many, if not most of the meetings I attended. Even though it was sometimes mocked, where a person would ridicule it, it was usually smoothly passed through and seemed to have become an organizational habit. The informants also told stories of how when occasionally questioned or when causing a conflict about its necessity, it would open up for a larger discussion about binary gender structures that in itself would constitute an example of *education through practice*. This was obviously not entirely uncontroversial, Melanie told of its use bringing about arguments in the Women's caucus between mostly older, second-wave identified feminists and younger generations of feminists, which is a part of a larger conflict around questions of identity and the role of linguistic change in feminist practice.

9 The most common pronouns utilized were she/her, he/him, and they/them, where the last ones were used as the gender-neutral ones.

6. Conclusions

This thesis has attempted to take a closer look at the way kyriarchy functions within OWS, and the forms which the struggle to dismantle it has taken and to what effects. As expected, oppressive structures are being reproduced in the movement, through the presence of white middle-class privilege that makes it hard for historically marginalized groups to find their place and make their voices heard. This has led to the founding of caucuses and of a Safer Spaces working group, and to the utilizing of different small methods or strategies in meetings; such as progressive stack, step up/step back, introductions with preferred gender pronouns, anti-oppression trainings and the creation of a Community Agreement. All these efforts strive towards introducing a culture of anti-oppression within OWS, and have been more or less successful.

Previous research has shown that lack of formal structures in organizations that deploy collective methods of decision-making is time-consuming and can lead to forming of informal hierarchies, with little or no means of accountability, which is disadvantageous to people of color and the working class. This was confirmed by some of the problems OWS was facing due to its model of organizing. The consensus process did not work effectively when used in large groups, which was exacerbated by lack of continuity because of a constant influx of new people. The existence of implicit norms of conducts based on unchallenged white middle-class privilege led to some ways of acting to become normalized and others deviant. However, this does not mean that the horizontal organizing model in itself is inherently bad, rather that it works best when used in smaller affinity-based groups, or groups where there is continuity, where trust and relationships can be built, which was demonstrated through the functioning of the Direct Action working group.

The identity-based caucuses were formed to provide safer spaces outside of the main movement for people with similar experience of oppression to organize together. The caucuses were necessary in the context but bear within themselves the contradiction that their sole existence is a proof of a flaw in the larger group. They also give rise to the more general paradox of identity politics, of seeking affirmation for an identity group and thereby separating it as being different, which risks essentializing oppressive categories that the end goal is to abolish. On the other hand, denying the existence of identity entirely also discredits experiences as a knowledge base that have shaped people's lives.

Progressive stack, and step up/step back was deployed in meetings to serve as a help for people to

raise their voices, but was inconsistently used. Some proclaimed it to mainly serve as a ‘pretty band-aid’ that made no real impact, but there were also good experiences of it when used in a proactive manner, where stack-keepers would encourage women and people who had not spoken before to step up and get on stack. Starting meetings with an introduction round where people were asked to tell their names and preferred gender pronouns was seen as a small, but radical method which served as an awareness-raising practice that challenge the gender binary.

So is OWS successful in dealing with racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and transphobia? There is not a straight answer to that question, primarily, as I would like to emphasize, because there is no such thing as an end-goal, a point to reach, where you have liberated your space from the practices of kyriarchy. Rather there is an endless struggle, and as such there will be endless success and endless failure. Dismantling kyriarchy should be seen as a constant project in process – and this was depicted most successfully through the means of *education through practice*. By the small things that we do in our everyday lives, by trying to do things differently, by failing and learning from it, by succeeding and learning from that, by being humble and self-reflective and by listening to other people's experiences, change can be made possible.

I wrote the following in my field notes on a subway train going from Brooklyn to Union Square which I think illustrates this:

There is no nut to crack though, rather a sticky slime to struggle through, get caught up in, move on, fall, get stuck, stand up again and keep fighting – in a stubborn hope that something else is possible than this. Activism is hard work – unpaid and punishable.

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The interviews

Amelia Sabine Rebelle	2012-03-27
Suzahn Ebrahimian	2012-03-29
Karanja Gaçuça	2012-03-29
Norhan Hassan	2012-04-01
Manissa McCleave Maharawal	2012-04-02
Melanie Butler	2012-04-04

APPENDIX A

Interview guide

Ethics:

This interview will be recorded and transcribed. Only parts of it will be used.

The thesis will be publicly available on-line.

You can decide to terminate the interview at any time.

You can decide not to answer any question.

You can decide to withdraw your contribution from the study at any time before it's published.

You can decide to be anonymous.

Background:

- ⤴ Can you briefly tell me a little bit about yourself?
- ⤴ What brought you to the Occupy Wall Street and how was your first impression of it?
- ⤴ What you have done so far, what groups have you participated in and what role(s) have you taken on in the movement?

Specific methods within informant's working group(s) and bigger gatherings:

- What is the main function of your group(s)?
- How do you work inside of the caucus/working group you are involved in – meeting structure, communication style, main issues/topics of discussion, decision making process?
- What is the main function of GA's and Spokes Councils? How do they differ/complete each other?
- How is the meeting structure in the GA and the Spokes Council – communication style – main issues/topics of discussion – decision-making process?

Main theme

- How do you think OWS deals with and works to prevent racism, sexism, homophobia and other types of stereotyping and prejudice within the movement? Are there any methods in use in this work?
- What do you think of the progressive stack and “step up – step back” and what is its function? How regularly is it used? Where and when? How does it work?
- What is the function of the caucuses? What do you think of them?
- What do you think of anti-oppression trainings and their function?
- What does that word “unity” mean to you – and do you think it's something to strive for? Why/why not and in what way?
- What potentials do you see that the OWS movement has of being an inclusive movement, where a multitude of voices can be raised and heard?