6 Occupation and the Party

The general horizon of our era is communist. Communism configures our setting, providing it with the shape that it takes. Communism is present as the force of an absence and an alternative, as the general field and division of the common, as the subjectification of the gap of desire. I conclude with a sixth feature that communism tags—the party. Whereas current dismissals of the party form proceed as if the very notion of the party depends on the fantasy that the party can know and realize the people’s desire, I argue that the party is a vehicle for maintaining a specific gap of desire, the collective desire for collectivity.

Communism as the party returns to and overlaps with communism’s most conventional referent—the Soviet Union. The communist party and the Soviet Union encounter the same criticisms: overly unified, hierarchical, exclusionary, and dogmatic. Insofar as communism tags both the USSR and a political party (that is, insofar as the two intermix and become indistinguishable), the left alternative to them has been formed out of opposition to both. It thus tends to be characterized by diversity, horizontality, individuality, inclusivity, and openness (where openness actually means the refusal of divisive ideological content). That these attributes also apply to the global networks of communicative capitalism, that they are celebrated by advertisers and invoked as best practices for efficient corporations, tends to be left unsaid. That exploitation and expropriation persist and can only be addressed through organized collective power is shunted aside, diverted around an individualist fantasy.

Consider David Graeber’s contrast between “classical sectarian Marxist groups” and “anarchist-inspired groups.” Marxist groups, he writes, “invariably organise around some master theoretician, who offers a comprehensive analysis of the world situation and, often, of human history as a whole, but very little theoretical reflection on more immediate questions of organisation and practice.” In contrast, anarchist-inspired groups generally “operate on the
assumption that no one could, or probably should, ever convert another person completely to one’s own point of view, that decision-making structures are ways of managing diversity, and therefore, that one should concentrate instead on maintaining egalitarian processes and considering immediate questions of action in the present.” Graeber acknowledges that his distinction is rather stark, even misleadingly so. What he thinks is important, though, is the contrast between vanguardism, the leading role of intellectuals or a party, and what he positions as the alternative, namely, a consensus process “built on a principle of compromise and creativity where one is constantly changing proposals around until one can come up with something everyone can at least live with.”

The global movements of occupation and protest gathering political momentum in 2011 seem at first glance to be clear indications that the anarchists are right. Occupy Wall Street emphasized consensus, inclusion, and the practices necessary to maintain and support occupation. It did without leaders, spokespersons, and demands. The ideas of autonomy, horizontality, and leaderlessness that most galvanized people at the movement’s outset, however, came later to be faulted for conflicts and disillusionment within the movement. Emphases on autonomy encouraged people to pursue multiple, separate, and even conflicting goals rather than work toward common ones. Celebration of horizontality heightened skepticism toward organizing structures like the General Assembly and the Spokes Council, ultimately leading to the dissolution of both. Assertions of leaderlessness as a principle incited a kind of paranoia around leaders who emerged but who could not be acknowledged or held accountable as leaders. So rather than solving the problem of left political organization by focusing on process and immediate questions of action, as anarchism suggests, Occupy Wall Street in fact poses it anew. It pushes us to think again about the role of a communist party.
On the flipside, just as Occupy can help us think about what a party might do or mean today, so does thinking about the party provide an alternative vision of the movement’s strength as arising from its assertion of division, its new mode of representation, and its affirmation of collective power. With this understanding of its strengths, Occupy can temper autonomy with solidarity (recognizing that individualized autonomy can be a barrier to solidarity, that is, collective autonomy), add vertical and diagonal strength to the force of horizontality, and attune itself to the facts of leadership (leaders emerge and serve different purposes). It can provide the contours, in other words, for a new kind of communist party, one indistinct and in formation yet discernible in the gap of a collective desire for collectivity that the movement inscribes within the repetitive circuits of communicative capitalism.

September 2011 shattered the ideology of an invincible Wall Street much as September 2001 shattered the illusion of an invulnerable United States. All of a sudden and seemingly out of the blue, people outraged by the fact that “banks got bailed out” and “we got sold out” installed themselves in the financial heart of New York City. Occupying the symbol of capitalist class power, they ruptured it. The ostensible controllers of the global capitalist system, still reeling from the crash of 2008, appeared to have lost control over their own cement neighborhood. Hippies with tents and cops with barricades had turned Lower Manhattan into a chaotic mess. Those seeking to combine the people’s work, debts, hopes, and futures into speculative instruments for private profit confronted a visible and actual collective counterforce. There in the power of the people where investment banks and hedge funds had already identified an enormous social surplus, a cadre of the newly active located an inexhaustible political potential. It was like a giant hole had been opened up in the steel and glass citadel of the financial class. Through it, traders, brokers, and market-makers—as
well as everybody else—could see the possibility of a world without capitalism. Wall Street was occupied.

As it unfolded in New York City in the fall of 2011, occupation demonstrated itself to be more than a tactic. Occupy became an evental site and political form. I use the term “evental site” to point to the event of the movement, its rupturing of our political setting. Occupy Wall Street changed the US Left. Before Occupy, the Left was fragmented, melancholic, depressive. Now we appear to ourselves—we say “we,” even as we argue over who we are and what we want. We say “we” knowing that there are divisions and differences among us that we express and that the term “we” expresses. Because of Occupy Wall Street, we have been able to imagine and enact a new subject that is collective, engaged, if, perhaps, also manic and distractible. Appearing differently to ourselves, seeing ourselves as changing the situation we are in, we also see our setting differently. It doesn’t look like it did before—it’s ruptured, open. Our setting is no longer fixed and given as the intractable reality of capitalism.

Badiou (writing about the Paris Commune) observes that a political rupture is always a combination of a subjective capacity and an organization of the consequences of that capacity. The rupture brought about by Occupy combines the courage to manifest ourselves as a collective political presence (the subjective capacity) with the elimination (or inexistence) of the supposition that we will go along with the status quo, that we will stand by and do nothing as we are dispossessed of our lives and futures (the organization of the consequences of the subjective capacity). With Occupy, we have introduced a new political subject into the scene. This changes everything.

Thinking about Occupy Wall Street as an evental site allows for a certain repetition, reflexivity, or self-inclusion. This reflexivity marks the event of the site as a subjectification, a forcing of a new being-thus. To paraphrase Badiou, Occupy “imposes itself on all the
elements that bring about its existence."¹⁴ Occupy is more than the sum of its parts. It’s the parts and the sum. Those who resist attempts to represent the movement’s politics and constituencies can be understood as voicing this “extra” dimension, the way the movement is an element of itself. A merely empirical description can’t account for this excess over its elements that is the movement.

In addition to being an evental site, the movement around Occupy Wall Street is an organization of capacities and intensities, a political form for the incompatibility, the irreducible gap, between capitalism and the people. To conceive Occupy as a political form is to think of it as a configuration of opposition within a particular social-historical setting. To call Occupy a political form for the incompatibility between capitalism and the people is to say that it has a specific and fundamental content and that this content consists in the concentration of intensities around the gap of capitalism’s failure as an economic system adequate to the capacities, needs, demands, and collective will of the people. On the one hand, this emphasis on the gap between capitalism and the people locates the truth of the movement in class struggle, in the antagonism between the exploiters and the exploited, those who own and those who do not, the rich and the rest of us. On the other, the emphasis on the gap between capitalism and the people marks the change in the setting of class struggle, a difference in setting such that to refer to the two great hostile classes as the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is no longer as obvious and compelling as it once was. It now appears as if everything is capitalism and this makes capital appear in its communicative, social, and affective—that is to say its common—dimensions.

How, then, does Occupy configure opposition within its—within our—setting? As I explained in chapter four, our setting is one of the convergence of communication and capitalism in a formation that incites engagement and participation in order to capture them in the affective networks of mass personalized media. These networks materialize a
contradiction. They produce a common, a collective information and communication mesh of circulating affects and ideas. Yet these networks also presuppose and entrench individualism such that widely shared ideas and concerns are conceived less in terms of a self-conscious collective than they are as viruses, mobs, trends, moments, and swarms, as if collectivity were nothing but an object of epidemiology (an idea or image with an impact “goes viral”). The event of Occupy, Occupy’s capacity to intervene in our setting, making it and us different from what we were before, has to be understood in terms not of continuity with communicative capitalism but of rupture, of a hole or break. If Occupy simply continued to offer networks, brands, and individual choices, it would be indistinguishable from what we have. Indistinguishable, it would be incapable of making new possibilities appear. It would lack a subjective capacity.

Remarkably, even as Occupy uses communicative capitalism’s networks and screens, its energy comes from a vanguard of disciplined, committed activists undertaking and supporting actions in the streets. The physical amassing of people outside produced a new sense on the US Left that collective resistance was again possible here. Protesters deliberately and openly abandoned the script of anodyne marches, adopting instead the new, demanding, and unceasing practice of occupation. They chose inconvenience in a society ideologically committed to it.

Not all protesters affiliated with a specific occupation occupied all the time. Some would sleep at the site and then go to their day jobs or schools. Others would sleep elsewhere and occupy during the day and evening. Still others would come for the frequent, hours-long General Assemblies. Nonetheless, occupation involved people completely—as Lukács would say, “with the whole of their personality.” As the occupations persisted over weeks and months, people joined in different capacities—facilitation, legal, technology, media, medical, food, community relations, education, direct action—participating in time-intensive working
groups and support activities that involved them in the movement even as they weren’t occupying a space directly. The movement became “a world of activity for every one of its members.”

The dedicated vanguard that is Occupy ruptured the lie that “what’s good for Wall Street is good for Main Street.” Occupy claims the division between Wall Street and Main Street and names this division a fundamental wrong, the wrong of inequality, exploitation, and theft. I turn, then, to division as the first of three key features of Occupy that account for its specific configuration of opposition and concentration of intensities and point toward new possibilities for the party form.

Occupy Wall Street asserts the incompatibility between capitalism and the people. Its central slogan, “We are the 99%,” transforms a statistic into a crime. It subjectifies it. The slogan takes an empirical fact regarding a numerical determination of the 1 percent’s degree of prosperity relative to that of the 99 percent and politicizes this fact, separating it out from the information stream as a fact that matters, that is more than simply one among many innumerable facts. We can contrast this slogan with those of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign: “Change We Can Believe In” and “Yes We Can.” Filled in by his emphasis on unity, on coming together in “a more perfect union,” these slogans obscure division, attempting to repress and depoliticize it.

Occupy cut a hole in this ideological image of unity and made the underlying division appear. Politicians lamented the turn to class warfare—but they haven’t denied it. The 1 percent complained that they shouldn’t be hated for being rich—but they haven’t denied the fundamental inequality. As a Pew Research Center poll found, 66 percent of Americans think that divisions between rich and poor are strong or very strong, an increase of 19 percent since
2009. Not only is this view held in every demographic category, but more people think that class division is the principle social division than they do any other division.⁶

Some in the movement have missed the point of Occupy’s forcing of division, as if the movement were nothing but an extension of the hope and change promised by the Obama campaign. Rather than emphasizing class struggle, they emphasize the multiplicity of the 99 percent’s incompatible groups and tendencies, and democracy as a process of integrating them. On this view, Occupy serves as a kind of political or even post-political open-source brand that anyone can use. Because occupation is a tactic that galvanizes enthusiasm (“tactics as brand”), it can affectively and democratically connect a range of incompatible political positions, basically working around fundamental gaps, divisions, and differences.

There are two mistakes here: first, ignoring the antagonism that connects the movement to its setting, namely, class struggle as a contemporary struggle against proletarianization; and second, effacing the distinction between Occupy and the elements that bring about its existence. By denying the fundamental opposition to Wall Street that divides the movement from the politics that preceded it, the embrace of multiplicity proceeds as if we were just the same assortment of individuals with opinions and views as before, rather than a collectivity so threatening as to incite overwhelming and violent police response. As a consequence, participants are encouraged to emphasize their individual positions rather than cultivate a general, collective one. The result is that they continuously confront one another’s particularities as differences that must be expressed rather than, say, disciplined, repressed, redirected, sacrificed, or ignored as not relevant for this struggle.

“Tactics as brand” neglects the way occupation is a form that organizes the incompatibility of capitalism with the people, its direct and material establishment of a physical base where people persist in bodily opposition to capital. As Naomi Klein points out in a contrast with the event-oriented alter-globalization movement, occupation establishes a
fixed political site as a base for operations. Holding a space for an indeterminate amount of time breaks with the transience of communicative capitalism, allowing a more durable politics to emerge. While the encampments were active, people had the opportunity to be more than spectators. After learning of an occupation, they could join. The protest wasn’t over. Occupation implies a kind of permanence: people are in it till “this thing is done”—until the basic practices of society, of the world, have been remade. To be sure, this benefit is also a drawback. Since occupations are neither economically self-sustaining nor chosen tactically as sites from which to expand on the ground (block by block, say, until a city is taken), there is a problem of scale built into their form. But rather than addressing this problem of scale, “tactics as brand” sidesteps it by treating “occupation” as an easily replicable set of practices (when occupation is actually difficult and demanding!).

“Tactics as brand” highlights flexibility and adaptability, and in so doing makes occupation fully compatible with capitalism. Reduced to “tactics as brand” or “tactics as generator of affective attachment,” Occupy Wall Street isn’t a new political subjectification at all. It’s a platform anyone can use if they feel like it. From this perspective, Occupy is just another strand of informational and affective content that appears on our screens and is intensely felt before other images pop up; it’s compatible with the system it ostensibly rejects.

Similar problems hold for the emphases on plurality and inclusivity also prevalent in movement rhetoric. They merge seamlessly into communicative capitalism and thereby efface the class antagonism at the movement’s heart, as if the movement were but a physical internet where people can post and blog and rant and opine without having to live with and adapt to the opacities of others for the sake of a common interest. It’s already the case that there are multiple ideas and opportunities circulating on the internet—so the contribution of the movement isn’t its ability to provide them. It’s already the case that people can hold
events, form digital groups, and carry out discussions. People can even assemble in tents on sidewalks—as long as they are in line for movie tickets or a big sale at Wal-Mart.

Communicative capitalism is an open, mutable field. It’s inclusive, all-encompassing, mobile, and malleable. That aspect of the movement—inclusivity—isn’t new or different. It’s a component of Occupy that is fully compatible with the movement’s setting in communicative capitalism. What’s new (at least in the last thirty years) is the organized collective opposition to the capitalist expropriation of our lives and futures (and I should add here that this organized collective opposition—even in its still frustratingly inchoate and fragile current form—also marks the difference between the event of the movement and our prior time of assorted small socialist and communist parties, some of which supported Obama and others of which have been reluctant to work as a popular front; before Occupy they had lost whatever capacity they might have once had to enable the collective forcing of opposition to capitalism; it remains to be seen whether they will adapt). In the face of the multiple evictions and massive police response to the occupations, Occupy faces the challenge of keeping present and real the gap, the incompatibility, between occupation and the ordinary media practices and individualized acts of resistance that already comprise the faux-opposition encouraged in everyday life.

Keeping division from being absorbed in communicative capitalism is hard. Capitalist society is already divided, with multiple gaps, omissions, and glitches. Occupy Wall Street, then, does more than divide. It forcibly inscribes division. Occupy asserts division and this asserting makes division more than itself; it makes it itself plus its assertion. Without this forcible inscription of division, division would be nothing but forking and splitting and hence fully compatible with communicative capitalism. Pointing toward new ways of thinking about the work of the party, Occupy Wall Street reimagines representation as the active, self-
authorizing assertion of division in relation to the appearing of antagonism. In Occupy’s new politics of representation, division isn’t effaced, displaced, or overcome. It’s asserted and linked to capitalism’s fundamental antagonism: class struggle.

Some argue that Occupy completely breaks with representation and representational politics. There are two interconnected versions of this point. One emphasizes the individual subjects participating in the movement. The other emphasizes the movement’s relation to its setting, to those outside it. The first rejection of representation holds that no one can or should speak for another person because doing so deprives the “spoken for” of their autonomy. According to this view, delegated autonomy is not autonomy at all but subjection to the opinion, will, and decision of another (as if collective action and common struggle were nothing but aggregation without submission, constraint, or transformation). Hence, to respect the autonomy of each, those in the movement have been encouraged to participate only in those actions with which they agree and to recognize that multiple heterogeneous processes comprise the movement; that these reflect conflicting, incompatible interests is pushed aside, repressed, only to return later with a vengeance. The second rejection of representation extends the first by insisting that just as no one can speak for another, no one can speak for the movement. The movement is leaderless. Because Occupy is the multiplicity of the ever-changing people and practices comprising it, any attempt to represent the movement would necessarily restrict, judge, and negate it, reducing its potential to the already given terms and expectations of the dominant system. To proceed otherwise, it is claimed, elevates some voices and concerns over others, reinstating the hierarchies the movement works to dismantle. Not surprisingly, the fact that some voices and concerns do emerge as leaders, as dominant or more popular, induces in some participants a kind of insecurity and paranoia over the doublethink—why are we all saying that this movement is completely horizontal when it’s obviously not?
The rejections of representation are misplaced. Treatments of Occupy as post or anti-representational disavow division and thereby miss the new form of political representation Occupy is inventing. Those urging that each speak only for him or herself disavow division within persons. Assuming that an individual can clearly know and represent her own interests, they avoid confronting the ways subjects are internally divided, not fully conscious of the desires and drives that motivate them. Furthermore, to the extent that they position the individual as the primary site and ground of political decisions, those arguing against representation fail to acknowledge how subjects are configured under capitalism. Speaking a liberal language of autonomy and a capitalist language of choice, they neglect the biases, misconceptions, and attachments structuring individual subjects. It’s almost as if they fail to get their own critique, stopping it too soon. If representation excludes and hierarchizes, then these processes occur within persons as well as between them (an insight found not only in psychoanalysis but also in countless discussions of subject formation, discipline, and normativity).

Those who insist on the unrepresentability of Occupy also disavow division between persons. Failing to take division seriously enough, they embrace a nearly populist presumption of organic social totality. Not surprisingly, the fact of hierarchy—whether born of skills, privilege, diligence, or contingency—necessarily and unavoidably comes up against claims of horizontality, disillusioning people perpetually suspicious of actual and potential leaders. It’s no wonder that an ideology of leaderlessness breeds suspicion—there aren’t clear and open ways to select and reject leaders. For newcomers, it seems mysterious, like a hidden elite controls everything behind the scenes. Similarly, fearful of excluding potential opportunities, some in Occupy tried early on to avoid confronting fundamental divisions within the movement. They advocated a focus on the immediate tasks of occupation. The effect, though, was to reduce division to forking (in other words, to
sublimate it). People pursued their own projects, perpetually splitting according to their prior interests and expertise, repeating the patterns dominant in communicative capitalism and failing to keep open the hole in Wall Street even as they dug multiple little ones. The fantasy at work in the insistence on the unrepresentability of Occupy is a fantasy of multiplicity without antagonism, of difference without division.

The Occupy movement brings together different political tendencies, varying degrees of radicality, and multiple interests and concerns. But this does not mean that it moves beyond representation. On the contrary, this broadness points to the unavoidability of representation as well as to its constitutive openness and malleability. What actions fit with the movement, which ones to take, and how directly they link up are ongoing questions. Ever-changing plurality is the condition of representation, not its overcoming. Those who construe Occupy as post- and anti-representation misread plurality as the negative limit to representation when they should instead recognize plurality as representation’s positive condition. Occupy Wall Street is not actually the movement of 99 percent of the population of the United States (or the world) against the top 1 percent. It is a movement mobilizing itself around an occupied Wall Street in the name of the 99 percent. Asserting a division in relation to the fundamental antagonism Occupy makes appear, it represents the wrong of the gap between the rich and the rest of us.

Critics of representation miss the way Occupy reinvents the politics of representation because their image of representation remains deeply tied to parliamentarianism. It’s true that Occupy eschews mainstream electoral politics. It is also true that Occupy rejects the nested hierarchies that conventionally organize political associations. But neither of these facts eliminates representation. Rather, they point to a rejection of the current political and economic system because of its failure adequately to represent the people’s will, a will that is itself divided and can only be represented divisively.
Lacan’s account of separation can help make sense of the way Occupy represents division. Lacan describes separation as the overlapping of two lacks. As Zizek emphasizes in a reading of Hegelian de-alienation as separation, “when the subject encounters a lack in the Other, he responds with a prior lack, with his own lack.” In other words, the subject realizes that not only does he not know, but the Other doesn’t know either. Each is lacking. My suggestion is that Occupy reformatrs representation as an assertion of the overlap of two lacks and thereby separates the movement from its setting. Broken into three steps: 1. Occupy encounters the lack in the big Other (that is, the incompatibility of capitalism with the people, the corresponding failure of liberal democracy precisely insofar as it is capitalism’s political form, and the overall decline of symbolic efficiency characteristic of communicative capitalism). 2. Occupy responds by asserting its own lack, whether as precarity (debt, unemployment, foreclosure), non-knowledge (no one really knows what to do, how to create a functioning egalitarian system of production and distribution), or incompleteness (the movement isn’t a whole or unity; it’s composed of multiple, conflicting groups and interests). And, 3. Occupy names or represents the overlap of these two lacks. It imposes itself as the “extra dimension” of the self-conscious assertion of the overlap.

Occupy Wall Street combines anti-representational rhetoric with the intensity of acts of representation. Few want to be represented; many want to represent. Frequently, video and photographic images of the movement show people recording and transmitting—representing—the movement. Admittedly, some live-streaming actions online present their coverage as journalism. They vary with respect to whether they position themselves as citizen-journalist-activists or as objective reporters covering stories neglected in mainstream media. Others see their tweets, photos, videos, and updates as key components of their activism: through these media contributions they spread awareness of the movement, inform people of ongoing and upcoming actions, and actively increase turnout for meetings and
demonstrations. A third, more reflexive aspect of these representational practices appears insofar as the images and reports share in a common name, in a common relation to an occupied Wall Street: this aspect is the self-constitution of the movement as a conscious collective practice. Together, in combination, the multiple streams and images reformat the sense of what is possible through collective action.

Who is it for? Who do we imagine watching the streams and forwarding or remediating the images? To the extent that the imaginary audience is “anybody” or “everybody,” we accept and repeat the expectations of communicative capitalism, looking outside the movement for validation, and preoccupying ourselves with media and means rather than division and ends. But to the extent that we are the audience, that we are the collectivity of those calling ourselves into being as a new movement of the people in opposition to capital, we enhance our courage and intensify our confidence in the political form of Occupy.

The third relevant aspect of Occupy as an evental site and political form is collectivity. Breaking with dominant tendencies toward the specification of issues and identities, the movement combined voices so as to amplify their oppositional political force. As I’ve already suggested, it replaced the ease of MoveOn-style “clicktivism” with the demanding and time-consuming practice of supporting an occupation. No wonder occupiers have been a vanguard—they are dedicated, disciplined, and unifying through practice a dispersed political field. Occupy arranges the physical presence of large groups of people outside, in visible, urban spaces, in political actions authorized by neither capital nor the state but by the people’s collective political will. The self-authorized practices of a politicized collective amplify specific contradictions in the current arrangement of the capitalist state such as the relation between public and private property (a relation manipulated and occluded in
networked communications platforms) and the distinction between legal and illegal (for example, Occupy Wall Street oscillates between actions that challenge capitalist state power and appeals to the law to protect them as they carry out these actions). Bluntly put, Occupy does work that Lenin associates with a revolutionary party: establishing and maintaining a continuity of oppositional struggle that enables broader numbers of people to join in the movement.\textsuperscript{10} It builds collectivity.

In communicative capitalism, people can be virtually present in all sorts of numerically large concentrations. Individuals can pass through many urban spaces with relatively little hassle (particularly if they adhere to class, race, and gender codes). Capital and the state \textit{can} and \textit{do} organize and facilitate the presence of large numbers of people in one site or another. Occupy—occupation as a tactic—self-consciously and deliberately recombines these components in a specifically political form that intervenes as a new political subjectification, one that opens up a new sense of collective power.

In his discussion of the Paris Commune as an event, Badiou describes how those who were inexistent were brought into “a politically maximal existence.”\textsuperscript{11} As what was inexistent comes to exist, another element ceases to exist. With Occupy Wall Street, the collective and self-conscious assertion of our collectivity destroys our prior political incapacity, our prior subjection to the terms and frame of communicative capitalism. Now we can and are right to say “we.” The movement is the form that incites our courage and confidence in doing so. We don’t have to retreat either to the political weakness of dispersed individuals against the force of capital and the state or to the ideological imaginary of unique, strong, and complete individuals autonomously creating their own destinies.

We shouldn’t be afraid to acknowledge, though, the continuing mistrust of collectivity. Even as people feel their collective power \textit{during} marches and demonstrations, \textit{through} chants asserting their power (“the people, united, will never be defeated;” “we are
the 99 percent”), and in the People’s Mic consolidation of voices, there remains anxiety
around hierarchy, non-transparency, leadership, delegation, institutionalization, and
centralization. Perhaps sensing, fearing, and repressing their own and others’ enjoyment
(whether of power or submission), people don’t quite trust each other as participants in
common struggle. On the one hand, people carry an individual sense that they have to do it
themselves (or at least know all the details of what’s being done). They don’t trust that others
will do things the right way, their way; they don’t see themselves and each other as solidarily
connected. On the other hand, some of us at the same time displace this sense of getting
things done onto others. We assume that someone else is doing it or knows what’s happening.
We say, “well, let’s wait and see what happens,” as if we were someone removed from or
outside the movement, as if the movement were the actions of others. This is the flipside of
the suspicion toward leaders—someone else is in charge. It’s also a kind of delegation
without delegation, or a delegation without representation insofar as it holds onto a fantasy of
autonomy as it denies the emergence, function, and need for leaders (that it nevertheless
unconsciously embraces).

In the US setting of overall mistrust of the political and economic system, too many
on the Left have tended to believe that autonomy, fragmentation, and dispersion can
substitute for solidarity. Consider, for example, the affective oscillation between the sense
that the movement gets energy from large numbers of people amassed together in a central
location and the sense that networks of local, specific, and often temporary practices and
projects are the best model for the movement (rather than the setting in which we are
beginning and on which we build). Similarly, there is anxiety over practices of inclusion and
exclusion, real challenges regarding different capacities for expression and collaboration, as
well as over different opportunities to meet, discuss, and participate. The very meetings that
make some people feel like they are building a new world make others feel like they are wasting their time, spinning their wheels, and getting nothing accomplished.

What’s the alternative? Trusting our desire for collectivity. This means acknowledging how autonomy is only ever a collective product, fragments are parts of ever larger wholes, and dispersion is but the flipside of concentration. We might think here in terms of a dynamic rather than an either/or: dispersed local actions matter; they are amplified when they are linked to a movement that can bring out huge numbers of people for massive events. And these massive events are more than just spectacles, more than momentary hints at the people’s will, when they are strengthened by the specific achievements of specific, targeted campaigns. In many ways, this has already been a key component of Occupy. Yet, too much movement rhetoric denounces centralization and celebrates locality such that people lose confidence in anything but the local and the community-based.

Likewise, strong structures, structures that can grow, structures with duration, need vertical and diagonal components in addition to horizontal ones. Again, this has been obviously true in the movement, yet much of the rhetoric of Occupy celebrates only horizontality, treating verticality as a danger to be fought at every turn. Diagonality is basically neglected, which means we haven’t put much energy into developing structures of accountability and recall.

Collective power isn’t just coming together. It’s sticking together. And sticking together requires a willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of others. Many are already doing this, yet the movement doesn’t acknowledge it insofar as its language celebrates and valorizes autonomy over collectivity. Collectivity is present in the common language and common actions in the movement, but not to and for itself. It’s sometimes asserted, sometimes experienced. But it has to be collectively desired and collectively built—hence the need for a party.
In sum, the Occupy movement demonstrates why something like a party is needed insofar as a party is an explicit assertion of collectivity, a structure of accountability, an acknowledgement of differential capacities, and a vehicle for solidarity. It also gives us a sense of the form such a party might take: a self-conscious assertion of the overlap of two gaps in the maintenance of collective desire.

Some depict the Leninist party as a spectre of horror, the remnant of the failed revolution the terrors of which must be avoided at all costs. In such a vision (which may not be concretely held by anyone but seems vaguely intuited by many), communism is reduced not simply to the actual (which is always necessarily ruptured, incomplete, irreducible to itself, and pregnant with the unrealized potentials of the past) but to the parody of one actuality, an actuality that has in fact changed over time and from different perspectives. Through this reduction (which is an ongoing process), actuality is displaced by an impossible figure, a figure so resolute as to be incapable of revolutionary change. Rigid, exclusive, dogmatic—it’s hard to see how such a party could even function in a revolutionary situation much less ever attract members in the first place: how would it get people to show up, to march, to write and distribute newspapers, to put their lives on the line? How would it grow or spread?

In contrast, Lukács’ account of the Leninist party suggests an organization formed as the subjectification of two lacks, the chaos of revolution and the non-knowledge of the party. 12 Lukács argues that Lenin’s party presupposes the actuality of revolution. It’s a political organization premised on the fact of revolution, on the fact that the terrain of politics is open and changing and that revolutions happen. Revolutions are not messianic events wherein long-awaited deities intervene in human affairs. They are results, conditions, and effects of politics wherein states are overthrown, dismantled, distributed, reconfigured, redirected. In the chaos of revolution, tendencies in one direction can suddenly move in a completely
opposite direction. Because the revolutionary situation is characterized by unpredictability and upheaval, no iron laws of history provide a map or playbook that revolutionaries can follow to certain victory.

That revolution is actual means that decisions, actions, and judgment cannot be perpetually deferred. When we take them, we are fully exposed to our lack of coverage in history, to the chaos of the revolutionary moment. We have to be confident that the revolutionary process will bring about new constellations, arrangements, skills, and convictions, that through it we will make something else, something we haven’t yet imagined. For the Leninist party, to wait, to postpone until we are sure, until we know, is to fail now.

The actuality of revolution requires discipline and preparation, not because the communist party can accurately predict everything that will occur—it cannot—and not because it has an infallible theory—it does not. Its theory, like the conditions in which it is set, is open to rigorous criticism, testing, and revision. Discipline and preparation enable the party to adapt to circumstances rather than be completely molded or determined by them. The party has to be consistent and flexible because revolution is chaotic. The actuality of revolution is thus a condition of constitutive non-knowledge for which the party can prepare. It’s a condition that demands response, if the party is to be accountable to the exploited and oppressed people, if it is to function as a communist party.

A communist party is necessary because neither capitalist dynamics nor mass spontaneity immanently produce a proletarian revolution that ends the exploitation and oppression of the people. A revolutionary period brings together and confuses multiple and changing groups and classes. Different spontaneous tendencies, degrees of class consciousness, and ideological persuasions converge. The Leninist party doesn’t know what the people want. It’s a form for dealing with the split in the people, their non-knowledge of
what they, as a collectivity, desire. As Lukács writes, “If events had to be delayed until the proletariat entered the decisive struggles united and clear in its aims there would never be a revolutionary situation.” What the party knows is that such a lack of knowledge must not impede action because it cannot forestall the actuality of revolution. The party, then, is an organization situated at the overlap of two lacks, the openness of history as well as its own non-knowledge.

The communist party occupies this site and subjectifies it; it provides a form for political subjectivity as it works in “total solidarity with and support for all the oppressed and exploited within capitalist society.” This dedication requires constant interaction with the struggling, proletarianized people. Constant interaction installs a double dynamic in the party. On the one hand, it must be strictly disciplined. On the other, it must be flexible and responsive, capable of learning from and adapting to the ever-changing situation. As it learns from the struggling masses, the party provides a vehicle through which they can understand their actions and express their collective will, much as the psychoanalyst provides a means for the analysand to become conscious of her desire.

One might object that my use of Lukács to present a view of the Leninist party as a form responsive to lack and contingency is selective at best. Such an objection could emphasize Lukács’s claim that “because the party, on the basis of its knowledge of society in its totality, represents the interests of the whole proletariat (and in doing so mediates the interests of all the oppressed—the future of mankind), it must unite within it all the contradictions in which the tasks that arise from the very heart of this social totality are expressed.” This objection misses its target: to unite contradictions is not to resolve them. The party doesn’t resolve contradictions; it expresses them as contradictions. Leninist revolutionaries take on themselves the demands and conflicts of the revolution. They perform the revolutionary situation, in all its chaos and uncertainty. To this extent, the Leninist party
cannot be a party that makes demands on the people; it is a party that makes present to the people the demands they are already making on themselves, but can’t yet acknowledge.

There is occupation and there is its politicization. As organized opposition to capitalism, the political form of occupation inscribes a gap that makes antagonism appear and forces this inscription as the division between the 1 percent and the rest of us. Failing to recognize how the event of the movement breaks with its setting, some have been reluctant to acknowledge the force of division and thus resistant to the very politics it enables. They prefer to insist that Occupy is non-partisan, post-political. This imbues the movement with liberal and capitalist (Lukács and Lenin would say “bourgeois”) elements because that is our default mode, our immediate way of thinking, doing, and responding. Underplaying the crisis of capitalism and overplaying the capacity for democracy to produce political change, voices in the movement try to deny the division they enact.

The role of the party is to insist on division. A party politicizes a part. The communist party politicizes the part that is not a part, claiming the gap constitutive of the people and subjectifying it as the collective desire for collectivity. Its task is not to fulfill or satisfy this desire (an impossibility), but to maintain it, to cultivate it as a desire. In our present setting, communicative capitalism attempts to absorb our political efforts into its circuits. Conforming to its terms seems natural, necessary, the only way to struggle: we must engage in elections; our actions must provide good media content; we need a catch phrase that will go viral. This is movement as commodity and fashion choice. The party provides a form for resisting these terms, the false choice of compromise or nothing (inexistence, failure, irrelevance) that has resulted in left-wing melancholia. As the organization of lack, it lets the choice for a gap be the choice for the power of collective desire.
Only by reading Occupy Wall Street through an insistence on the gap of desire, that is to say, in terms of the communist party as a form, is the communist horizon of the movement visible. To what crime does the movement respond? To which processes does it react? The remarkable rupture the movement effects arises out of its organization of a radical collective response to capitalism. Reading the movement any other way resubmerges it in what was already circulating through, and as individual contributions to, the affective networks of communicative capitalism.

But what do they want? What do you want? The question of demands infused the initial weeks and months of Occupy Wall Street with the endless opening of desire. Nearly unbearable, the lack of demands concentrated interest, fear, expectation, and hope in the movement. In these moments, the occupation functioned as a gap hystericizing the mainstream media, perhaps even the public it called into being. What does the movement want—from us?! What is it demanding—of us?! Occupy Wall Street was an other that reawakened political desire, forcing people to acknowledge the ways their compromised choice for liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism has sublimated and betrayed their desire…and for what? For widespread proletarianization, global warming, and economic collapse?

Contemporary communists are tasked with organizing individuals. (To be sure, Lukács grappled with capitalist over-individualization already in the twenties). Those of us in the US, UK, and EU operate within an ideological setting that celebrates the individual, its unique voice and valuable opinion. Collectivity is either configured as stifling and oppressive or romanticized as the communitarian ground of authentic identity (whether ethnic, racial, religious, or otherwise). This ideological configuration displaces attention from the powerlessness of individuals as individuals to reform the systems determining their lives (systemic change requires the organized power of a group) to the wide range of opportunities
for individual consumption and self-expression. It holds out these opportunities as a kind of lure or reward, as that special something collectivity threatens to take or abolish, obscuring the fact that for the vast majority such opportunities are there only as possibilities under threat, not actual experiences of freedom.

What do they want? What do you want? The party seems poised to steal our enjoyment, making our individual voices and choices (and potential for fame and wealth) all the more likely but for the threat to them. Yet the question of what the party wants or the anxiety so many on the Left have with regard to the party exhibits the same transferential inversion at work in the demand for demands addressed to Occupy Wall Street—what does the party demand of me?—as if the party would tell us what to do, what to want. Perhaps the underlying desire is for a party that could tell us what we want and how to get it. The operative fantasy is that the party really does know how to organize society. Or perhaps the underlying desire is for a party that could force us to do what we secretly want and that would give us the permission and means we need to enjoy. We can smite our enemies, take all their stuff, and be on the right (left) side of history! Leftists are justifiably anxious with regard to the party—a desire for collectivity is not the only desire for which parties have provided a form. They have also served as forms for desires for a master. Nonetheless, proceeding as if the party is and can be only the form of a master leaves the master’s power in place, allowing it to thwart our collective power all the more effectively.

The fantasies of a master help us avoid the more unbearable confrontation with the gap constitutive of the people. Together with the nuggets of momentary enjoyment we accrue in the repetitive circuits of capitalist drive, they defend us against a desire for collectivity that we don’t yet want. Collectivity—common cause and common determination—is difficult. It involves giving up what we don’t have for something we can’t achieve. We are and cannot name a whole. We are and cannot fully justify the coercive and productive forces we unleash.
The communist party is a form for maintaining this gap without yielding to fantasy or fatalism—which is why Badiou theorizes its operation in terms of courage as well confidence. Neither instantiation nor representative of the people, the party formalizes its collective desire for collectivity; when the party fails to keep open the gap of desire, it ceases to be a communist party.

A couple of months after the movement to Occupy Wall Street was underway, a common gloss to the complaint that the movement hadn’t made any demands circulated. Its basic message was that the complaint was disingenuous. We know full well that the demand is for an end to the inequality and unfairness permeating the system. One of the images accompanying the message was of a mass—the people, the 99 percent—against one, a fat cat high net worth individual with a dollar sign on his suit. The goal of communism is also clear: from each according to ability, to each according to need. How we make this happen is up to us—it’s the purpose and principle of the sovereignty of the people.

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2. See the articles published as a special supplement to *Theory & Event* 14:4, 2011, ed. Jodi Dean, James Martel, and Davide Panagia.


4 Ibid., 208.


11 Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, 221.


13 Ibid., 31.

14 Ibid., 30.


16 Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on The Unity of His Thought*, 34.