On the morning of November 17th, two days after the NYPD stormed Occupy Wall Street's encampment, I took the Subway to Lower Manhattan to join the day's march on Wall Street. From the start, I had been skeptical of OWS. For its lack of organizational clarity, its seemingly facile collective analysis, and its downright shabbiness, I feared it would hurt rather than help the Left. I marched with several thousand protesters—and perhaps an equal number of journalists and cameramen—toward the New York Stock Exchange to attempt to halt the day's trading. It was cold and drizzly, not the sort of weather that lifts spirits.

Waiting for the demonstrators was the largest police force on earth in its grandest mobilization. Hundreds of helmeted riot officers stood guard with batons, pepper spray, and zip-tie handcuffs on the ready. Units of mounted horseback police towered above the crowd and marched in unwavering formation to assert supremacy over the mass. A police helicopter hovered uncomfortably low, dipping well below the rim of the Financial District's gloomy canyon, creating deafening reverberations off the glass and steel above.

At around 9:00 demonstrators lay down in the street to disrupt the intersection of Pine and Nassau Streets, relative alleyways near the stock exchange. Riot police made quick work of clearing the street of the demonstrators and arrested about 100 people, a few of whom were bloodied up or otherwise injured in the process. Protesters were then divided onto the four respective sidewalks on either side of the intersection. The separated groups struggled to communicate over the din. An increasing air of exasperation took the crowd.

At 9:30 the Stock Exchange bell rang promptly, and trading began, unimpeded.

This left me a bit confused. I hadn't gone there to protest the police. A mob mentality had taken hold of the group, whose frustration manifested itself in the most rudimentary fashion against people solidly within the income bracket the protest claimed to represent. Clearly, police help to reproduce the status quo of those in power, and have a history of racism, classism, and brutality. Yet even if one accepts the premise that police are systemically a rotten bunch, it still was an unfortunate strategy to focus energy on them rather than at the bankers filling the office towers that hulked over the demonstration.

The crowd had let its emotional outrage—perhaps the movement's greatest fuel source—turn on the wrong group. To me, this was proof that Occupy Wall Street did not have an organizational structure that could keep it on message in the most basic way.

With this on my mind, I went to Zuccotti Park the following morning to explore the post-raid state of the Occupy Movement's epicenter.

Cleared of all mattresses and makeshift structures, the sleek granite slabs that constitute Zuccotti Park were once again visible. Fewer than a hundred protesters milled about chatting, drinking coffee, speaking with reporters. My main connections within the Occupy Movement had been incommunicado since the Nov. 15th raid—arrested, scrambling to put the pieces back together, given up, who knew—so I set about speaking with random protesters on the ground.

The stories they told that morning gave a strikingly unified picture. The movement had been falling under increasing disarray even before the police raid. For weeks, the consensus-driven governing process, the General Assembly, had become more and more cacophonous, and there was increasing fear that voices of reason were being snuffed out by louder, more persistent voices. In anarchist
governance, all voices are equally respected and no one is supposed to have more power than the rest.

The tension between preserving horizontal, nonhierarchical governance and the desire for effective facilitation was beginning to unravel the social fabric of the encampment. “This anarchist GA system is not going to work. It favors people who are articulate and people who more forcefully step into the role of administration,” a demonstrator named Todd told me. “We keep seeing the same faces taking control and people are getting sick of it.” Todd explained that the more someone took control, the more efficiently things began to move, but the angrier the diehard horizontalists became. Eventually the GA would remove the person in control, and the group would again be adrift.

For this reason, some had begun to talk seriously about broadening possibilities for leadership—hierarchy—in the movement, and a splinter government formed, composed of more seasoned anarchist activists, who met in an indoor public space several blocks away. When the rest of the park discovered this, bitter mistrust and recriminations ensued. Soon the park’s west side considered itself a ghetto repressed by the college educated east side, closer to Broadway. Media outlets were increasingly seizing on the encampment’s internecine struggles to smear the movement. The November 15th raid, many have speculated, was a godsend from Bloomberg that prevented a complete implosion of the movement’s base.

In large part, my question was answered: the “leaderless” movement did have leaders, but the organizational structure in the park was so effectively anarchist that such leaders could not effectively govern, and eventually performed something many identified as an attempted coup. The issue of interaction with police had been discussed at General Assembly meetings, but was never resolved. My suspicions that the movement’s structure could not confront such a basic problem were confirmed.

For people like myself, interested in more hierarchical forms of organizing in areas like labor, Occupy’s failures of governing could seem an indication of horizontalism’s inferiority.

But I feel that this would be a mistaken conclusion. Unlike the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street is a real protest movement. Its organizing principle is based on the rage and exposure of Americans whose economic and political rights neoliberalism trashed. Protest, in its purest form, is the extreme pole of bottom-up organizing: collective outrage spontaneously erupting into action. To confuse protest for a variety of other organizing principles is a trap progressives like myself easily fall into. As Frances Fox Piven explains:

The effect of equating movements with movement organizations—and thus requiring that protests have a leader, a constitution, a legislative platform, or at least a banner before they are recognized as such—is to divert attention from the many forms of political unrest and consign them by definition to the more shadowy realms and social problems and deviant behavior. (Piven, 1979)

For now, OWS’s lack of leadership has proven to the world that it is a real people’s movement, one that does not need leaders or institutional backing to exist. For this reason, when Jeffery Sachs or the Wall Street Journal tries to speak for the protest, no one buys it even remotely. The horizontal structure effectively repels attempts to co-opt. Occupy leaders will continue to emerge and consolidate influence. Non-protest movement organizations will spring up on the crest of the protest movement.

This model will fumble—in a sense that’s what it does best. At this point it is an expression more than an endeavor, and its governance reflects that. Factions will turn against the police and themselves. From an organizing standpoint, the anarchists have done their job in preserving the autonomy of the crowd, facilitating free interaction and equal access to ideas and feelings. Everyone in the park I spoke with, looking forward, seemed ready to build less strictly horizontal organizations on top of OWS’s energy, to begin a different phase that included the growth of institutions to further the fight against inequality and rote consumerism.

“The important part of this movement is not this park,” said protester Matt Sky gesturing widely to the shiny granite benches and stairs. “What’s important is that this is where you meet to figure out which movements will come out of this park.”

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