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Preamble to an Ethnography of the People's Mic

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By Chris Garces



I am not afraid to confess feeling swept, against my will, into the whirlpool of news coverage from Zuccotti Park. To begin with, initial media reports on Occupy Wall Street seemed almost proudly negligent in their characterizations of protesters' manifold and serious grievances with the state of this country. While New York Times protest reporters N.R. Kleinfeld and Cara Buckley [claimed](#), for example, that "[t]heir politics zigzag wildly," it was rather the corporate news coverage that found itself profoundly disoriented, and lashing out confusedly, when face-to-face with an event of undeniable political renaissance. If journalists weren't branding the occupiers a bunch of latte-sipping Ivy Leaguers, with their high-end laptops and pda devices, they were being summarily dismissed as unproductive anarchist elements, new-age idealists, the deliberately unwashed or the serially unemployed. Never mind Zuccotti Park's complete absence of toilets and other sanitary facilities, or the early police enforcement cruelly prohibiting the use of tents. Never mind the movement's breathtaking political, religious, gendered and generational diversity, as [Nathan Schneider](#) and the [N+1 collective](#) have reported, or the protesters' ongoing organizational and political ingenuity.

One month into the protest, UNC-Chapel Hill's Jonathan Weiler noted in his article [The Media and the Five Stages of Grief over Occupy Wall Street](#), that the "psychology of our gatekeeper media," at least the large corporate news outlets, had barely moved past their "denial" stage, the sarcasm of their reportage swinging wildly between "anger" and "bargaining," with the horizon of "depression" and "acceptance" still looming far in the distance. Everyone had some kind of diagnostic.

OWS was a Rorschach test for one's position vis-a-vis the failures of American political leadership, or an ideological screen for the projection of myriad fantasies and nightmares.

I continued to watch the scene in Zuccotti swirling about from the relative distance of Ithaca, NY, where I teach. The corporate news media kept spinning wave after wave of politically tendentious or disingenuous anti-OWS reports. But when the first video footage of the OWS General Assemblies' public mode of deliberation surfaced online, I could no longer resist fully immersing myself, or engaging in something akin to ethnographic "advocacy research," in order to provide a more empirically sensitive account of the Occupation. Even the most nuanced, holistic news coverage on People's Mic seemed un-attuned to its lived and deeper political complexities.

The rising tide of counter-neoliberalism and its powerful symbolic undercurrents weren't exactly new to me. In the early 2000s, I had already served ethnographic witness to spectacular "[crucifixion protests](#)" against the unchecked privatization of urban space and zero-tolerance policing, and had documented the deleterious civil effects of neoliberal mass incarceration in my other hometown—Guayaquil, Ecuador. As a cultural anthropologist, I also consider myself a Latin Americanist. With one foot in Guayaquil and another in the greater NYC metropolitan-area teaching scene over the last decade, I've always viewed my professional task as one of critiquing hidden fidelities to privatization from a vantage point both geographically and morally situated in the global south. But watching the OWS unfolding in New York reminded me that perhaps my relationship to the United States is more pan-Americanist than I previously had imagined.

What I understand to be singularly important about OWS, derives from a perspective both inside yet inherently alienated from U.S. political culture as currently constituted: I am referring to what is distinctly American about the General Assembly's "People's Microphone" phenomenon. Here are three examples:

This strange, effervescent and recently discovered mode of address is actually part-in-parcel with a much longer-standing American tradition of hallowed political speech—actively cultivating a sense of deep horizontal community and democratic process not felt on the Left in this country for what seems like generations. (I started writing this report the day after 92-year-old Pete Seeger marched into Zuccotti at the head of thousands in solidarity with OWS, but more than 55 years after he famously plead the First Amendment, rather than the Fifth, before Senator McCarthy’s HUAC commissions.) There is clearly an air of mass defiance in the park, fully present in body and spirit, regardless of the political ecumenicalism or the ideological polycentrism of OWS itself. Here is video I took of a General Assembly, convened in Washington Square on October 8th (the first time the Occupation had assembled en masse in another NYC location) to mark the protest’s third week, in which the speakers used People’s Mic and helped newcomers to recognize its demotic, edifying applications for an emerging body politic. The impression you get watching this assembly unfold, from where I sat filming the video, is the exuberance of democratic self-fashioning:

My best guess is that few of us in Washington Square previously had any personal experience of direct, mass democratic assembly. The citizens’ ideals of public participatory and representative flourishing, in my opinion, have withered beyond recognition under a decades-long and well-concerted financial assault (waged by liberals and conservatives alike) in which government productivity has been measured in new corporate ideal-typical models for public accountability. One need not consult the full body of Noam Chomsky’s or David Harvey’s works to grasp the executive over-reach and moral failings of this top-down political economic program. The General Assemblies’ capacity to allow for direct, mass political deliberation “subtracts” the aesthetics of demoralization associated with corporate-led, private-public initiatives as the *only social channel* for getting the work of politics accomplished. Rather than deny this exuberance with impulsive skepticism, or decry its ‘naïve’ realpolitics offhand—“how can OWS possibly translate into concrete policy recommendations?”—, I would suggest that anyone who claims to write from the disaggregated and scattered Left first appreciate the depths from whence it emerged.

The problem with rising corporate influence and corruption across the United States is not limited to the odd legal status (the so-called “legal personhood”) conferred to these powerful, undying agencies, but also to the slow and seemingly implacable politico-juridical creep of regimes that constitutionally uphold their positive and negative rights. It was Hannah Arendt who [wrote most cogently](#) on this deeper and typically unmentionable issue of the American political experiment:

“It was precisely because of the enormous weight of the Constitution and of the experiences in founding a new body politic that the failure to incorporate the townships and the town-hall meetings, the original springs of all political activity in the country, amounted to a death sentence to them. Paradoxical as it may sound, it was in fact under the impact of the Revolution that the revolutionary spirit in America began to wither away, and it was the Constitution itself, this greatest achievement of the American people, which eventually cheated them of their proudest possession” ([1963: 239](#)).

What Occupy Wall Street has managed to unsettle, in my opinion, is precisely this deeper structure of constitutionally protected trans-local as well as international private agency, which typically undercuts any claims to “legitimate community” that do not immediately incorporate or disaggregate into private-public interest groups themselves.

Might we not argue instead that the political retrenchment of 18th century constitutional ideals, which serves to reinforce 18th century political and moral value systems, actually cheats the American public of its greatest earned-freedoms? Today, the loudest advocates for so-called “Originalist” or “Textualist” constitutional interpretation (which metes out jurisprudence as if we still were living in the time of the Constitution’s framers) also lionize a narrowly imagined “real America” (usually comprised of the corporate executive board, private-public interest group, or religious congregation) as the only civic-moral and social foundation of America’s democratic system. Yet what I discovered upon arrival in Zuccotti was the town hall “frontier assembly” par excellence, a radically heterogenous public gathering, cobbling together notions of the public good in a democratic process attentive to plurality and minority protections almost unimaginable unless you observed its public workings firsthand.

Recent U.S. political experience presents what can only be called the negative image of Occupy Wall Street. Liberal media pundits during the 2008 election cycle repeatedly lambasted the Republican rhetorical conceit that only conservatives—in contradistinction to all Democratic candidates—spoke for America’s “small town values.” This Republican claim was tinged with latent racism when the Democrats’ candidate for highest office happened to be African American, and when Anglo-Americans enjoyed a strong nationwide, particularly rural, ethnic majority. But this argument also had a certain empirical, however tendentious, foundation in U.S. politics-as-experienced. The nationwide electoral map shows nothing but Democratic blue in nearly all the country’s major cities; in urban contexts, the cosmopolitan ethic of mutual tolerance of and for cultural difference is just as deeply interwoven within

the American political imaginary as the radially open-ended town hall meetings upon which much of our political system was originally projected upwards, but disavowed in practice. In other words, “small town America” had turned into a catchphrase for the imaginative restoration of conservative rural and suburban modalities of “compartmentalized” or “complementary” political associations (where a host of other terms might be substituted for “complementary” and “compartmentalized”). Yet here and now was a revitalized political Left, remaking itself in Zuccotti Park by staking a parcel of land upon which to build political community, a broad public gathering of the dispossessed and barely enfranchised in the heartland of world financial government. The OWS proceedings that I experienced were at once a highly cosmopolitan environment and, through its use of the General Assembly, a highly affective town hall meeting, one that Arendt properly understood as the generative engine of the American revolutionary spirit.

Yet what could possibly tie the coming community together, in an age when every classroom or gathering is so easily interpolated with cell phone or e-mail interruptions, not to mention the omnipresence of our over-determined and over-extended professional lives? The generative model of the town hall meeting often works against our contrapuntal, vocational and avocational, daily rhythms—saturating our mundane daily events with ceaseless movement between individual tasks and private entertainment. Any possible answer begins with the People’s Mic. The People’s Mic is described quite well in a variety of journalistic and academic venues, which note that OWS General Assembly is only feasible given this low-tech collective ritual, which allows for speakers to communicate and deliberate on proposals across Zuccotti Park’s large open spaces. Hendrick Hertzberg of the New Yorker [summarizes the People’s Mic](#) most succinctly and colloquially:

A speaker says a few words, then pauses; the audience repeats them, loudly and in unison; the speaker says a few more; the chorus repeats; and so on. If the group is unusually large, the repetition radiates out, like a mountain echo. The listeners register their reactions silently, with their hands. Four fingers up, palm outward: Yay! Four fingers down, palms inward: Boo! Both hands rolling: Wrap it up! Clenched fists crossed at the wrists: No way, José! There’s something oddly moving about a crowd of smart-phone-addicted, computer-savvy people cooperating to create such an utterly low-tech, strikingly human, curiously tribal means of amplification—a literal loudspeaker.

The Nation was among the first news outlets to identify [the importance of the People’s Mic to OWS](#). Al Jazeera’s own report is another [go-to source](#)

. Nathan Schneider, the only journalist “embedded” with OWS from its very beginning, has discussed the strengths of this phenomenon in a [suggestive online interview](#). And cultural anthropologist Hannah Chadeayne Appel has dashed off a fascinating [ethnographic sketch](#) for *Social Text*’s blog site. According to most protesters, this felicitous mode of public speaking is said to have originated spontaneously on the first day of the Occupation. The protesters tell stories, which may or may not be apocryphal, about the battery-powered megaphone brought to Zuccotti not being cooperative when speakers wanted to use it. It’s considerably more likely, however, that OWS protesters recognized or were cautioned by police that NYC zoning restrictions forbid noise-amplifying machines in marches or public protests. Several commentators have noted the irony of an anti-noise ordinance serving as the basis for creating a “tactile media” technology that helps to produce such enduring individual and collective affect—along with the perseverance of a mass assembly the municipality would rather see leave (either by force, or the slow, police-regulated attrition of the protesters’ energies.) One way or another, the OWS’s standardization of People’s Mic for mass deliberation is by nearly all accounts a novelty in the annals of church assemblies, small town meetings, revolutionary councils, and the like. What I want to argue here, at least, is this: given its procedural importance to the Occupy movements, the People’s Mic is a powerful new genre of political speech.

But People’s Mic as a technology of speech should not be defined as Occupy Wall Street’s own private or autochthonous invention, either; the historical similarities with other forms of message-carrying and political communication are simply too many to be ignored. The tactic was frequently used last decade among protest groups who found themselves hounded by police or kettled into separate areas—allowing groups who are violently segregated to speak to one another in spite of their distance or separation. A modified version of this tactic, more akin to the game of telegraph, was also used when marchers needed their voices projected up or down their ranks. Amongst encampments of the *indignados* in Spain, the People’s Mic was quickly deployed and then abandoned as the movement to protest the country’s draconian national debt-restructuring models swelled and diminished last summer. More anecdotally, similar forms of projecting a speaker’s words have been used among union organizing groups in Brazil, the A16 World Bank mobilization (2000) and EU Summit in Gothenberg (2001), and amongst the followers of early 20th century unions and collectivist groups surrounding Jean Jaures and Eugene Debs. Anthropologist David Graeber alludes to the People’s Mic-type practices over the last two decades in [a recent dispatch](#) discussing his role in the Occupy Wall Street movement’s early organizational development. (If anyone can point me to other examples of People’s Mic, past or present, please don’t hesitate to e-mail me at ceg97 AT cornell DOT edu). In any event, there are plenty of antecedents

to be located and critically inspected, for instance in the age-old public office of 'criers,' who relayed critically important news over geographical space before the advent of electrically amplified speech.

I will have a great deal more to say about the People's Mic in the weeks and months ahead. But any preliminary sketch of its influence begins with an account of the phenomenological experience of being part of this body of public speakers. Many news commentators have noted the physical strain of one's daily participation in this group phenomenon. The GA's meetings can last upwards of two hours, often running from 7pm 'til midnight, or later. People's Mic only works in practice if scores or hundreds repeat every word of a public speaker's dense, usually impactful-as-possible commentary. There is a certain euphoria in making one's voice merge seamlessly with others', an especially powerful force—in the sense of democratic influence—when you repeat words that you fundamentally disagree with for the benefit of democratic process. My own vocal chords, I admit, were suffering from unfamiliar trauma after the two-hour mark, when I first plugged into the People's Mic. But your own dissent is perfectly embodied in this technology, too. Disagree with a speaker, and you can make your disagreement silently known to all and sundry with a basic repertoire of hand signals, while continuing to listen to/cultivate attention for/engage with the person's "soapboxing," in OWS's demotic parlance.

When Slavoj Žižek gave a speech before Occupy Wall Street using the People's Mic on October 9th, his argument turned on a claim that the "[holy spirit](#)" was present with everyone in the assembly. "What is the holy spirit?," he asked. "It's an egalitarian community of believers who are linked by love for each other, and who only have their own freedom and responsibility to do it. In this sense, the holy spirit is here now. And down there on Wall Street, there are pagans who are worshiping blasphemous idols." Žižek's insightful observation, as abstractly persuasive as it may be, looks far beyond the distinctly Protestant genealogies of hallowed speech within the General Assembly. That congregationalism forms a moral as well as a political community may serve, unfortunately, as justification enough for completely banishing non-coreligionists: in this case, Wall Street's high-rollers. But over-emphasis on this politico-theological element (its knee-jerk reliance on the friend/foe distinction) may overlook precisely the qualities of hallowed speech that comprise a more seductive, inclusive moral horizon for Occupy Wall Street's political renaissance. People's Mic has a very specific democratic genealogy, one that subtly differs from the Protestant ethic as the spirit of capitalism, though certainly contributing to its particular American formations. The act of public speaking in the General Assembly— currently a town hall frontier assembly, as it was during the 18th century—is to stand up and speak precisely when, and perhaps only

when, the holy spirit (a gift of speech, of and for the patchwork of the demos) speaks through you.

I might add that one's hallowed participation in the GA's deliberative process is a deeply ascetic endeavor, to the extent that speaking up refashions oneself as part of the collective, mind, body and soul—as in Marcel Mauss's understanding of the total human being (*l'homme total social*), which aims to mitigate the all-consuming influence of either the individual or the collective as the exclusive foundation of sovereign accountability. The protesters' admirable will to protest despite their "lack of demands"—the incredible perseverance of this new political community—lies precisely with the General Assembly's self-identification through the People's Mic. Yet OWS's unwillingness to assimilate may ultimately invite repressive force from those who seek to crush this project of nonviolent assembly, or to make use of it for their own political gain. For this reason and many others, Occupy Wall Street may eventually fail, but the People's Mic has cultivated and rehabilitated a version of the United States' political Left that will survive the movement's potential repression, and even, perhaps, its co-optation by larger, more entrenched political forces. The fact that People's Mic has been deployed in Occupy and (un)Occupy movements in cities and towns across the country, as well as overseas, where municipal ordinances don't prohibit noise-amplifying devices, is our first indication of the vast democratic standing reserve of this new genre of political speech.

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