

Occupy Wall Street Consensus General Assembly and the Zapatistas: Into the American Zócalo

With the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement around the US, evolving from a small encampment near the financial center of global fiscal crisis, we are finally exposed for the first time nationally to the process well-developed by the rebels of Chiapas, Mexico—consensus governance. As with the Zapatista case, now almost a generation ago, major news outlets expressed frustration with the lack of a single, focused cause or demand—ignoring the real news story, which has to do with the *process* they have established and advocated for; a space to develop their own evolving “story”—beyond the resonant slogans that themselves suggest a broad platform (e.g. “We are the 99%”). In the growth trajectory of OWS as a nascent social movement, the emphasis has been on the democratic process and equity of voice, based in an inclusive democratic consensus. Consensus also serves as the basic method of decision-making among the autonomous Maya communities that make up the Zapatista movement. It has been much discussed and analyzed in social movement and academic left literature, but rarely brought out into the public square—until now.

The pent-up energies of frustration with the status quo, put on hold for too long in anticipation of “Change we (thought we) could believe in,” find their outlet in this movement—as exemplified by the meteoric growth of Occupy camps across the country, over 100 by recent count. By means of social media, as in North Africa and Europe, this movement is moving more quickly than the media itself. In the past we have written about Maya and Zapatista “appropriation” of alien ideas and social forms; here we find their methods are now being appropriated nationally and globally, as the flows of influence come up from the global south.

David Graber, anthropologist and Wall Street original occupier, played a seminal role in pressing for their first NYC gathering to shift away from the previous protest rituals and towards direct democracy. This was influenced by the whole alternate globalization movement and the process of horizontal decision-making (do what you want to see), itself heavily influenced by the global reach of Zapatismo. In fact, it was in a Barcelona meeting associated with Zapatismo solidarity that major planning for the Seattle battle began, a pivotal event questioning normalized globalization. Graber acknowledged the influence of Zapatismo in an interview with Pacifica News on October 11, 2011, also noting both the inspiration and help from people in Europe and North Africa, to create leaderless, non-violent, democratic protest.

General assembly-based governance reclaims public space, and allows for stable continuity (more than 12 people in one public place is illegal in downtown NYC) in a landscape hostile to such authority-questioning activities. The themes of the gatherings also resonate with the broad systemic critique presented by Zapatismo. They stress that the system is so broken,— the functioning of the political system neutralized by rogue money and partisan interests by a tiny, rich minority—that it is counter-productive to single out or to affiliate with any one political party or leader. Forums of democracy from below, unlike a specific cause managed by “leaders,” is an opening up of spaces for the voiceless majority—as Graber states it—almost precisely the goal of the Other Campaign of the Zapatistas, as they reached out from Chiapas to the larger nation during the last presidential elections in Mexico.

The American Autumn of OWS, spreading from sea to sea in a manifest destiny apart from political process, may not fix the system. But as it brings together socially, politically and racially diverse voices, it resonates again with past Zapatista commentary: *Never More An America Without Us!*

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